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Vol. 14, No. 3 FOGHORN CLANCY, Editor Fall, 1950

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IN THE ARENA

A Department for Readers Conducted by

FOGHORN CLANCY

GREETINGS, rodeo fans, here we are again in the arena filling our lungs with air and bellowing out the latest that we know of in the land of the cowboy and glamorous cowgirl—and there is sure plenty of action in the arena as the followers of the rough sport gird themselves for the wear and grind of a strenuous season!

Thus far in the season it looks like one of the best. There are a lot of new rodeos this season and the contestants are jumping all over the country, each one trying to make as many of the contests as possible. Some travel by auto, some by train, some by plane, but they sure get around. It has become quite a fad for contestants to compete at one rodeo in the afternoon, then hop a plane and compete at another rodeo four or five hundred miles distant at night.

A rodeo contestant's winning are not all profit. There is a lot of money paid out in entrance fees, traveling expenses and hotel bills, but all the tophands always seem to have plenty of folding money, so it is to be supposed that they are doing all right.

A New Rodeo

One of the new rodeos this spring was the one at San Antonio, in connection with the San Antonio Livestock Exposition. It was staged in the new $3,000,000 Bexar County or Joe Freeman Coliseum, 12 performances with crowds so great that they exceeded the expectations of all the officials and assured the rodeo and stock show a permanent place in the city of the Alamo.

The rodeo was produced by Everett Colborn, or rather by the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation of which Colborn is the manager and guiding light. Fred Alvord was the arena secretary, Pete Logan the announcer, and Bobby Estes and Eddie Curtis the judges. George Mills, Jack Knapp and Jimmy Schumacher were the clowns.

Among the specialty acts were the Hendricks Family or Trio, presenting three separate acts. First was the Flying Twins Roman Riding, presented by Byron and Lee Hendricks, who are twin brothers, and who have a new and sensational Roman riding act, in that after riding Roman style in gallops and quick turns, they each jump their two horses over an automobile at the same time. Standing with one foot upon the back of each horse, each brings his team at breakneck speed from opposite directions, one team jumping the car in front of the windshield and the other just back of the windshield. The object is to have all four horses in the air and going over the auto at the same time.

Their second act is presented by Ann Hendricks, who, with her great dancing horse, "King Richard," gives a real spectacular and finished horse act that is as fine as anyone could wish to see. Their third act is a comedy mule act Roman style, with Ann and Byron playing the leading roles and with the aid of a specially constructed Ford car. After a lot of comedy Roman riding, one of the mules chases Ann up on top of the car and jumps on the platform of the car with her. After the mule is finally coaxed from the top of the car, and is led from the arena, the other mule takes his place, apparently without command, in a special compartment of the car, and proceeds, so it looks, to drive the

(Continued on page 8)

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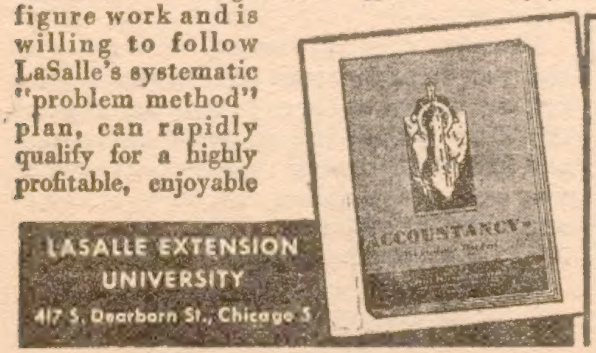

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IN THE ARENA

(Continued from page 6)

car from the arena. The trick is that the third member of the trio, Lee, is concealed in a small special compartment in the bottom of the car, from which he is able to drive it.

San Antonio Results

The final results of the contest events at the San Antonio Rodeo were as follows: In bareback bronc riding—First, Wallace Brooks, of Sweetwater, Texas; second, Bud Spealman, Daly City, California; third, Buck Rutherford, Nowata, Oklahoma; fourth, J. W. White, Greeley, Colorado.

Toots Mansfield of Big Spring, Texas, won the calf roping; Rex Beck, of Coleman, Texas, was second, Don McLaughlin, of Fort Worth, Texas, was third, and Doyle Riley, of Ballenger, Texas, was fourth.

Bill Linderman of Red Lodge, Montana, copped the saddle bronc riding, Cotton Proctor, of Belton, Texas, was second, Johnny Reynolds of Melrose Montana was third, and Johnny Cobb, of Fort Worth, Texas, was fourth.

Manuel Enos, of Fort Worth, Texas, was best man in the steer wrestling. Oknagan Paul, Tulsa, Oklahoma, was second, George Milles, of Pueblo, Colorado, was third, and Willard Combs, of Henryetta, Oklahoma, was fourth. Bud Watson, of Baird, Texas, was tops in the bull riding, Wag Blessing, of San Fernando, California, was second, Todd Whatley, of Hugo, Oklahoma, was third, and Harry Tompkins, of Dublin, Texas, was fourth.

Poco Bueno, owned by E. Paul Waggoner, of Arlington, Texas, and ridden by Milt Bennett, won the finals of the cutting horse contest.

The Phoenix Show

Phoenix, Arizona, stepped their rodeo up this year from the three day show of six performances as it has been in the past, to a ten-day show with afternoon performances only and had ideal weather until Saturday, which was next to the closing day, when it rained, and while the storm did not rain the show out it cut the attendance down considerably.

The rodeo was a good one, but the parade on the opening day was one of the greatest to

(Continued on page 123)

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THE MARKET
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TICK TICK
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Spirit of the WEST

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When Ricado Smith buys a black horse to please Linda Lovell, he places both his heart and his life in jeopardy!

CHAPTER I

Trouble at the Auction

CURT TURNAGE'S voice rasped harshly as he handed his orders to Ricado Smith.

"There's one horse at that auction I want for myself. Lay off of it, Ricado!" Curt Turnage's tone was habitually arrogant. "It's a deep black gelding, rising four. We'll be there very soon."

"Ricado" Smith, so called after the Ricado River on which he was born, glanced at his fellow rodeo rider and grinned.

"Curt, don't you reckon that some day you'll recover from being the son of an ex-governor? It's afflicted you so bad you give commands plumb reckless!"

Turnage reddened. His black eyes narrowed. "You aren't riding to this auction to buy a horse. You said yesterday you had one too many. I'm warning you not to bid on that black. I want him. Sixteen hands—name of Jett."

Ricado's handsome, bronzed face looked amused. "You are blamed near making the horse necessary to my happiness, Curt. No difference between your manners and a blacksmith's rasp. I have got one horse too many, but I'm making you no promises. Yonder's the auction grounds. And quite a crowd!"

THEY left their respective mounts at a hitchrack and mingled with those who were waiting for nine o'clock to strike, when the auctioneer would present himself.

From boyhood, horse auctions had had a fascination for Ricado and now his curiosity was stirred about the black gelding. For Curt, with all his hellish and uncertain temper, was no mean judge of horseflesh; his own string was proof of that.

Not that Ricado had any thought of buying. He had come partly for mere amusement and partly because he had a vague hope that he might discover, in the auction crowd, the slender figure of a girl he had seen yesterday in the public square of Tejon.

In riding garb, whip in hand, she was running toward a drunken tramp who was kicking a puppy around. But Ricado had beaten her to the goal. Reaching down from his saddle, he had grabbed the tramp's belt, swung him off the ground and had slung him several yards away. The tramp landed, sprawling, face down, lurched up cursing wildly, and had staggered away from the square.

Ricado had watched him go. When the rodeo rider had wheeled his horse toward where the girl ought to be, both she and the puppy had vanished.

IF SHE were here at the auction, she would make all the other women at this affair look ordinary, inconsequential. Her motion in running had been graceful. Women usually, he reflected, ran like cows. Her profile, her cloudy hair blowing back—she had been bareheaded—the outline of her young figure under her thin riding waist, had made a lovely picture. Although seen only for an observant second, it had stayed with him.

Perhaps she would appear and bid in the black gelding. That would be a joke on Curt! He wondered about her name and where she lived. He thought, a little bewildered, I never remembered a girl so vividly before.

He hadn't seen her horse during the puppy incident. Tied behind the nearest store most probably. Not likely she would ride over to this Bart Ettock's ranch.

His brilliant incisive gaze roamed vainly over the crowd. She wasn't there. He turned his eyes on the setting for the auction. There was a raised platform with a small table and chair for the auctioneer—not that he'd be likely to use the chair. In the background lay the sprawling Ettock ranchhouse.

In front of the platform was a cleared and roped off space for showing the horses.

Ricado glanced at his wrist watch; it was twenty minutes of nine. He started to yawn and was startled clear out of it by a low, melodious voice at his side.

"Please, will you come with me for a moment?"

There she was! And asking him to go with her!

Thrilled, he followed her as she slipped through the crowd. She led him across an open space, then into a heavy grove of cedars that fenced in what would have been open ground except for the various graves; obviously a family burying ground.

In the center of the place stood a high

LINDA LOVELL

headed, scornful-eyed, glossy black gelding, his halter rope tied to a broken head-stone.

The girl said hurriedly, "Could you give me just a few minutes to explain?"

"All the time you want," he said quietly, feeling how tense and troubled she was.

She stood by the great black, caressingly laying her hand on his mane as she faced Ricado. She spoke rapidly:

"His name's Jett. When he was about six weeks old, he was on a train carrying horses. He was with his dam, a scrub mare of no breeding."

He smiled at her, "Then his sire must have been fine."

"No. She had such peculiar markings that I heard of her afterward. The sire was nothing but an ordinary ranch stallion. In the wreck a lot of the horses were killed. The cars rolled down into broken ground, off the track. The dam was killed. So was another mare that had her own car and a colt too; her colt was crushed to pieces and she was killed. But the little scrub colt lived. Only one leg was broken, a simple fracture below the knee. I was with a rescue party. The boss cowboy with the horses was going to shoot the colt. I asked for it and he gave it to me. Oh I'm afraid I'm boring you!"

"No! Go on, please."

"I splinted the leg, took the baby home in a buckboard, bottle fed him and cured him. Now he's rising four, sound as a dollar—and—and I love him." Her voice broke.

She steadied it, went on: "But he's got to be sold, now, if he brings a good price. A girl I know, and love, is in immediate need of a costly operation. My stepfather won't help, says she's no kin—and Jett is all the resource I have to complete the sum we need. I thought—"

He came closer. "You thought—what?"

"Since he must go into strange hands—if only they could be—kind hands. You saved that puppy. If you'd buy Jett, I think in a year I could buy him back from you. I have a plan— Oh what must you think of me for troubling a stranger?"

He thought fast, as she used the word "buy."

BUY the gelding? If he did, there would be the devil to pay from Curt Turnage! Not that that mattered. Ricado was drily amused to remember that if Curt had been civil, he could easily have gotten a promise from Ricado that he wouldn't bid on Jett. Then the girl's

Joseph Dreany

appeal would have been vain. As it was, Ricado was free to bid, if he chose, and in his inside vest pocket, securely fastened, was his prize from a race purse —a one thousand dollar bill.

Buy the gelding? If he got it, he'd have to sell off one of his present horses —to please a stranger. Didn't even know her name! Yet in some strange way she wasn't a stranger. In her nearness and her beauty, her youth and her grief about the horse, she was someone he had known a long time. This was just a feeling but it seemed true.

Her eyes, liquid with unshed tears, searched his in deep anxiety as she waited on the decision; but he made it almost at once.

As the tiger started his leap, Ricado made a lightning cast

He said gravely, "I'll buy your horse, if the bidding doesn't go beyond me."

Relief shone in her face, "Oh, it won't! No matter how splendid he looks he's just a common horse, like the whole bunch Bart Ettock is having auctioned. Jett won't bring over two hundred dollars. But would that be too much?" she added with fresh disquietude.

He smiled at her, "No indeed! I've got some prize money in my vest pocket. But you might tell me your name?"

She flushed. "Oh—I didn't realize, knowing yours! You're the top star in your rodeo. You're Ricado River."

"Really Bill Smith," he interposed. "But I came from the banks of the Rica-

do—that means restless. Whoever drinks its water gets like the river and goes away. But your name?"

"Linda Lovell. I live here, with my sister Annie and Bart. She's his wife. I must hurry Jett to the corral now. But when he comes up for sale I'll be watching—hoping!"

She slipped through the grove with the black. Looking after her until she vanished, a thought sprang up in Ricado's mind so vivid and in a way so uncalled for that it almost seemed as though someone beside him had spoken it: She won't need to buy back the horse. It'll be hers when we marry.

He thought indignantly. Where do stray ideas pop up from? Bet she's engaged and the day set.

He went back into the auction crowd and found himself beside Curt Turnage, who glanced at him sharply, then gave his attention to the auctioneer who was just beginning.

There was a half hour of auctioning before Jett appeared on the scene, tossing his sleek head, trying to play with the cowboy leading him, the cowboy showing marked disapproval of the attention paid him.

But in spite of his frivolity the horse carried himself royally, and the women present exclaimed over his beauty. Ricado saw Curt's face light up with fierce interest . . . if Turnage lost in the bidding he was going to take it hard.

"Offering this fine saddler—Jett!" announced the auctioneer. "Three gaited, rising four, sound and splendid." He looked expectantly at the crowd. He was a big man with a loud and resonant voice.

"Fifty!" a leatherfaced rancher said.

The auctioneer looked indignant but Curt Turnage cut in with, "Hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred!" said the rancher, who wanted the horse for his wife.

"Two hundred and fifty!" growled Curt, his gaze possessively on the beautiful black. Jett snorted in an impatient disdainful way and shook his head.

Ricado laughed. "He don't think much of your offer, Curt. Three hundred!"

Curt half turned toward Ricado, a red light of hate blazing in his eyes. Then he faced the auctioneer with:

"Three fifty!"

THE rancher who had made the first bet nudged a neighbour and murmured, "Five to ten that last feller gets him. He's dead set on the nag!"

"Taken! That Ricado—"

"Four hundred!" said Ricado.

The second bettor grinned. The auctioneer said loudly in the slight pause, "I am offered four hundred for this horse."

Curt snarled, "Four hundred and fifty!"

Ricado drawled, "Five hundred!"

Hearing Curt's low but vicious oath he expected another rise, but Curt was as silent as a coiled copperhead; he had run out of money.

The auctioneer declared, after a short attempt at urging another rise, "Going—going—gone!" His gavel banged on the table. "Sold to the famous rodeo star, Ricado!"

Ricado came forward. To his relief the auctioneer could change the one grand. The man said in a low voice:

"The owner, Miss Linda Lovell, is round at the back, behind the ranchhouse. She wants to see you. Pay her and she'll give you your bill of sale. She has it ready."

She was alone there, Ricado discovered. The general attention was all on the auction.

Ricado found her standing by the black gelding. She said quickly, "Oh, Ricado, he cost you a frightful lot of money! Here is the bill of sale and it acknowledges five hundred dollars; but I'm giving you back half."

"Never heard anything so ridiculous," Ricado said sternly. "Why that horse is worth every cent of it. The money came dead easy. It was half of a prize."

"A prize for which you risked your life. But because this money is for Mary,

for her sure recovery, I'll keep it all, as you say."

They were standing close to each other and to the horse. Swiftly she caught up his right hand and pressed soft lips to it.

As swiftly he drew his hand away, "Good gosh! Your sweet lips on my rough fist." She had straightened up now, smiling, looking at him with moist eyes. He said impetuously, "Linda, if I . . . may . . ."

She was still smiling. He caught her in his arms and his mouth crushed on the honey and fire of hers. Then, fearful of taking an advantage of her passionate gratitude, he let her go. He felt bewildered by the dual forces roused in him, and by his suddenly strong irrational feeling that she belonged to him. What sort of midsummer madness was he tangled in?

Hurriedly he produced five one-hundred-dollar bills, pressed them into her hand. "Here's wishing your ill friend all the good luck in the world," he said.

She took the bills and put the black's halter rein into his fingers.

A door near them opened, with a faint whine from its hinges. A man, black-browed and hard-featured, came down the steps and moved toward them.

Linda said, "Bart, this is the rodeo star, Ricado, who's just bought Jett."

"And was fool enough to pay five hundred dollars for him," growled Bart Ettock. "Money to throw away on a girl who'll die anyway."

Ricado said equably, "Mr. Ettock, I want to leave the gelding with Linda until the show moves on. I'll settle for his board."

Ettock shrugged. He liked rodeos and had once ridden in them.

He said, "All right. Take him, Linda."

A flush of delight rose to her cheeks. She took the halter rein eagerly. Ricado said lightly, "If I need him before I leave, I'll borrow him. I thought of riding him in Wednesday's race. Ever try out his speed?"

She shook her head. "I never let him get beyond a sharp gallop. I'm funny about running a horse—it scares me and I'd a notion he'd take the bit. Do ride him in the race. Only I'd hate it if you lost. Is there a rodeo prize?"

"Yes. Now talking of rodeos, I must ride back for the parade."

Once more at the auction hitchrack, of which there were several, he found Curt Turnage, also after his own mount, while perhaps a dozen men were lounging around theirs and exchanging auction gossip. They weren't interested in any of the mule sales now going on.

CURT was white with rage as Ricado came up; his nostrils were puffed with it and his eyes were venomous. He said thickly but in a voice loud enough for all present to hear,

"I warned you. I told you to lay off that black gelding!"

Ricado stared at him, then said with open contempt, "Warnings and orders are kid stuff unless you've power to enforce them. Move away and let me get at my horse."

The low toned gossip among the men near them ceased. More than one of them noticed the ivory handled gun in Curt's holster, a bad thing to pack when a man was half crazy with anger, although Ricado's being unarmed ought to safeguard him.

Curt held his menacing stance. He snarled, "That black gelding was tied in that cedar grove yonder, hidden there. That girl, who owned it, sneaked you into the grove, out of sight. I saw both of you when you came out."

Ricado said sternly, "Enough of that!"

The group near them had fallen silent, watching and listening.

Curt's snarling fury broke from him, "You ran the price up on me, paid high, because of the favors. The cedar covered favors you got from that smart gal, Linda Lovell."

Curt had scarcely uttered the last three words when Ricado knocked him flat.

A sharp intake of breath came from

the men near them. They'd not forgotten Curt's gun and neither had he. One of the watchers moved a step nearer.

Turnage had hardly hit the earth when he came up like a released spring, murder in his eyes. His gun was half out of its holster when the man who had moved nearer grabbed his gunwrist with steely fingers. The sheriff said in chill tones,

"Take your hand off of it, feller. This is the Law."

Sheriff Harrington's grip, his cold voice, brought Turnage to his senses. He let go his gun but again reddened with anger when Sheriff Harrington said, "I heard the word you used, all you said. Pile on your horse and get from these grounds or you and me will take a trip to the hoosegow."

Curt stared at him, bit his lip, loosed his horse, sprang into the saddle and raced away.

Harrington said, turning to Ricado, "That feller ought to be flung out of your show."

"He wouldn't be missed, Sheriff," Ricado said drily.

"There ain't a sweeter, purer nor more admired girl than Linda Lovell in this whole West," the sheriff said as Ricado unfastened his horse. "She's been pestered to death with suitors but now she's engaged." He stopped to glance at his wrist watch.

His last word shocked Ricado, who stammered, "Wh-who's she engaged to?"

The sheriff said briskly, "Last feller in the world you'd think she'd care for —a verse writin' cousin of hers in the East. They correspond every week, the postmaster tells me, but they ain't set any date yet."

Ricado mounted, his face expressionless. "So long, Sheriff," he said. "Be seeing you!"

He rode quietly away but as he went on toward the rodeo assembling grounds he forgot Curt completely in spite of sore knuckles. He forgot the black gelding. He was discovering that he was two men—a fool who had fallen in love with an engaged girl and a reasoning man who declared the world was full of girls and some day he would find one just as lovely, just as charming.

Ah, no other kiss had ever been like hers, for her lips had answered his and surely it had seemed that passion burned in the answering.

It was mere gratitude Reason retorted coldly.

CHAPTER II

They Called Him Ruin

UPON reaching the parade assembling ground, Ricado changed to the show horse a wrangler had promised to have ready for him. Soon, in the leading part of the parade, he was riding through the excited and happy town of Tejon which counted the rodeo as the peak of the year in enjoyment.

Equally delighted were the tourists who came from all points of the compass, attracted not only by the show but also by the human friendliness of rodeo crowds in which suspicion and snobbery was non-existent and one stranger might speak to another with no danger of an icy glare.

Nothing holds a crowd's interest in parades like picked riders on fine horses and Ricado heard a young woman near the curb express this to her companion:

"You're right, Rex. There's something about horsemen that makes other parades, such as autos and the like, look deadly dull. Even in airplanes there's no glamour except for the pilot. He must get a kick out of it, while the passengers just hope they'll arrive soon."

"There's a subtle companionship in horses," her companion added. "Even those who were never on one dream about them."

The cattle town was packed and the crowd was, as usual, colorful with the effort of many to go Western in gay

beaded vests, white sombreros, silk neck handkerchiefs, broad studded belts—or even Mexican, in expensive charro jackets.

Through it all flowed the wild music of the rodeo band that seemed to talk of canyons, of high pastures where untamed horses galloped.

The fine parade was soon over.

When Ricado heard the rodeo music again, this same street crowd was filling the tiers that looked down on the arena. While the band played and the spectators waited expectantly, Ricado also waited for his call to the arena.

Near him Shorty, one of the rodeo riders, complained wrathfully that a thin mysterious man in black had been caught trying to turn some of the rodeo horses loose, had been heard muttering something about liberation. The man had escaped from two angry wranglers after he had opened the stall of a black gelding about two in the morning.

Ricado's mind instantly leaped to Curt Turnage, then he grinned at himself. The time element exonerated Curt so far as the horse Jett was concerned. Of course, he thought drily, Curt may have gone completely haywire about black horses.

Shorty said, "There goes your steer wrestlin' call, Ricado." As Ricado left, Shorty looked after him with affection.

"Hundred per cent fine," Shorty murmured. "The gal who gets him will be lucky. Reckon he ought to marry since his folks are all dead. As for me, I had to get out of home because the house was bustin' with us. But Ricado and Curt haven't any folks. Even Curt's ex-governor pa has passed on. Reckon Curt is like potatoes—the best part of him is underground; but Ricado is like wheat—the best part's on top. I must tell Curt that. I'm a-gettin' witty!"

Ricado was in the arena, in hot pursuit of the running steer, galloping at its flank, his mind concentrating hard on the time values between steer and saddle. The slightest error in timing and he would hit the earth, crashing on his face.

He hurled himself from the leather, reaching for his steer's horns. He felt his tension relax as his fingers fiercely gripped them while his high heels dug in. His weight swung back, braking the steer to an angry halt.

THEN came the duel of strength, the steer set to defeat any throw, the man putting ascending power into turning the armed head for the fall—a silent wrestling match.

As he had seized the horns, Ricado had been aware that his horse had, naturally, dashed on. Then Ricado saw, almost unaware of the seeing in his contest absorption, that without reason his horse had suddenly stumbled, gone down.

But there was no time to wonder about it; the reluctant steer's head was beginning to turn, yielding a little—a little more.

[*Turn page*]

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The steer rolled flat. The tying was swift and Ricado rose from it to ready applause.

He led his horse out of the arena, slowly because it limped painfully. Once outside a wrangler came hurrying to him and they lifted the lame foot, revealing the peculiarly broadheaded, short nail bedded in the frog.

Ricado said drily, "Fixed so it wouldn't lame him for a few minutes. If he had fallen just when I was quitting the leather, I might have been crippled or killed."

Shorty Ferris, third in star ranking, sifted closer, asked quietly, "Suspect anybody special?"

"Perhaps—" Ricado began, broke off again. He had been thinking of Curt Turnage, but having no proof, he dismissed the thought.

Shorty observed shrewdly, "One thing, among several, that I like you for is that you try to be as just to an enemy as to a friend. I sort of figured on Curt myself. I done heard about the auction. No matter how decorious a gal is, she's still a gal and so a doggone trouble breeder."

"Curt bred the trouble with his own foul tongue," Ricado said instantly.

"There's just one logical deduction," Shorty declared. "Where there's a grievance there's a gal, and a grievance about a gal means a showdown."

"It was about a horse, you rattle-headed idiot," Ricado said busy lighting a cigarette.

Shorty's call came, he disappeared. Prade, a wrangler, who had been listening to the conversation, drew near, volunteering, "Shorty's awful set in his opinions."

Ricado didn't answer. He was thinking about the ugly words Curt, in his rage, had applied to Linda. Ricado decided, and correctly, that neither Linda nor Bart Ettock would hear of this from any of the men who had been present. Curt had taken punishment and that was the end of it.

The wrangler draped himself against a post and said amiably, "I hear you drawed Ruin. Wouldn't care about ridin' him myself."

"Let the name of the captive be a warning to the captor," a deep sonorous voice cut in, "lest the rider bite dust and the bitted one go free!"

"What in tarnation!" snorted the wrangler. "That cuss back here again! I chased him out of the quarters once already."

He disappeared in the direction from which the bodiless voice had come but shortly returned. "Turned him over to Jack and told him to see him plumb off the grounds."

"Who is he?" Ricado asked lazily, enjoying his cigarette as he still waited his call.

"Calls himself the 'Liberator.' His idea is we got no business captivating animals. He's apt to turn half the horses loose if you don't get him away."

Ricado laughed. "He wouldn't get far with that."

"You don't know. Those funny-ideaed ones can be foxy and that feller slips around like a shadow."

"Might be working for some long-roper." Ricado was stamping on the cigarette he had thrown down.

"Don't think so. There comes your call. Don't do no dust bitin'. It would tickle that Liberator gent too much."

Ricado grinned. But he didn't feel amused when he stepped down from the chute side into his saddle on Ruin. He had heard too much about the horse, hitherto a victor in every contest.

OUT on his native wide pastures, Ruin, a big long-bodied smoke-colored horse, had been peaceful enough until he was driven into a corral for breaking.

Contrary to the plans made for him, it was he who did the breaking—of several riders. Then the foreman interfered. "None of you-all fork that devil again. I've had two calls for rodeo outlaws and he's elected right now."

So came Ruin into the alleged civiliza-

tion of cities. Up to now no one ever stuck him long enough to hear the signal from Ruin's back.

Curt Turnage had just finished his own ride on a less dreaded outlaw. He was lounging against the west arena wall that he might watch the duel closely.

He swore to himself that, if Ruin smashed Ricado, killing him, he would buy the outlaw and set him free. For with Ricado dead and his heir, who ever that might be, acquiring the gelding, it might be easy to buy him.

As though he felt Turnage's encouraging good wishes for him, Ruin came plunging into the arena, bawling with hate. Then, suddenly silent, he went into wild pitching and pile-driving.

Sweating with fury when his rider continued to sit him securely, Ruin fence-rowed and sunfished.

The spectators sat silent now, watching tensely for there was a wickedness about the horse that flowed out from him and made itself felt.

He bucked higher than Ricado had ever known a horse accomplish before this, and he came down wickedly stiff-legged, jarring his rider from head to foot. Next he rushed for the heavy railing around the arena and tried to smash his rider's leg against it.

Failing in this, he flung away from the fence, reared until he nearly pitched backward, hurled himself forward and went back to high bucking and pile-driving as though he knew that was hardest of all on his rider because of the incessant, malignant jarring.

Curt thought eagerly,

"That infuriated devil will surely throw him . . . and I believe the horse will stamp on him!"

* * * * *

While the outlaw riding was going on, Linda Lovell sat at home busy with intricate embroidery on a linen bureau scarf, each end of it having a large and self-important peacock.

She glanced up at the clock and sighed. She was tired of the scarf. Now she heard the phone ring, heard Bart Ettock answer it in the hall.

He hung up and walked in through the open door of the plainly furnished living room, looking pleased.

"Well, Linda, I just heard that Ricado rode that frenzied outlaw they call Ruin to a finish. I figured he would, and made me a couple of good bets."

She looked up, her eyes lighting with relief. "Oh, that's fine!"

"Well, your girl friend is off your hands now. In the hospital. You raised all the money that was needed. Trouble with you, Linda, is you're too soft-hearted. Soon as you get shed of one piece of human junk, you go huntin' up another. I'll bet you ain't puttin' them fool peacocks on cloth for yourself; you're aimin' to sell it to pamper some kind of two-legged, mouldy rubbish."

"I certainly am selling it," she said coldly.

"Where do you sell the fool stuff? Not in Tejon!" His tone showed irritation.

She answered quietly, "No, not in Tejon. It goes by mail to the Woman's Exchange in New York City and wealthy people buy it."

He said impatiently, "Are you stupid enough to do this work when you're just making expenses on it? You have to buy this cloth and these shiny threads."

"I make a profit on it."

"Where does that profit go?"

She was silent, flushing. He commanded harshly, "Answer me! I've a right to know!"

"No right; I'm of age," she retorted defiantly, busy with re-threading her needle.

"But you live in my house, eat my bread."

"I give enough help here to pay for that. Ask your wife." Her voice was bitter.

"Oh, you women always stand together," he sneered. "But it just happens I know where your profits go—to

a whining old beggar who writes letters like this." He drew an envelope from his pocket.

SHE sprang up and caught the envelope from his hand, took out the folded sheet inside, turned on him proud, accusing eyes.

"You opened this!" she cried. "You opened my mail!"

"Yes. When it came in from the box this morning. You can't have secrets in my house. Who is this old beggar? How did she come to fasten on you? Is she married? It's signed Rosalee Robins."

"She is my great aunt. I've never talked of her, and Annie hasn't either, because you hate old people. She has a tiny income, not enough to give her all that's necessary. No, she's not married."

"Necessary!" He caught her wrist and took the letter from her. "Just listen to this! 'Darling child—Saturday next week is my birthday. I would so love to have something frilly and foolish, so I can forget I will be ninety years old then.' An old maid of ninety—something frilly and foolish! Of all the nonsense!"

"Well, she's going to get it. It's almost finished. Look!"

She drew from the box near her a bed jacket, beautifully made, with a fall of frills at the neck, frills at the wrists and small pink bows down the front. A cluster of tiny butterflies appeared on one shoulder.

He glared at it.

She said quietly, "I was making it for her birthday before that letter was written."

"You sure do collect old women," he sneered angrily. "There's that old ignoramus across the river!" She wasn't listening. She drew an open letter from the jacket box.

"You happened to read the jacket letter. Now listen to this one: 'Darling—I manage to totter around and wait on myself but there is dust everywhere and I scorch what little food I have to cook. The window panes are dim like my poor eyes. . . .' Doesn't that touch your heart?"

He said cynically, "Shucks, no!" And added, "She ought to quit totterin' and die. What good's a woman if she don't marry and bear children? Dried up old cornstalk!"

"*I'll* never marry," she said fiercely. "I might get a man like you!" But even as she spoke she heard again a baritone voice in a grove, thought of Ricado's kindness.

Bart sneered, "You forgettin' you're engaged to that sissy verse-writer out East?"

Suddenly she laughed, "You made me forget. I nearly forgot something else I want to tell you. The manager of the rodeo—you know him, Mr. Thorne—has written a song of the West. It's to be sung in the arena; it's entitled: 'Spirit of the West.' I'm having an audition today; the sheriff told him I'd do. And, Bart, if I'm accepted I get twenty-five dollars each time I sing!"

He scowled. "You traveling off with the show? Your sister won't like that."

"It's only for this week, but if I'm asked and I go, she'll like it if you do. Annie never breathes unless you approve of it."

"She's like all women ought to be," snarled Bart.

"And when I go to Tejon for the audition I'm riding Jett and leaving him there, coming back on another of Ricado's horses."

"What's the idea? Sick of the gelding?"

"I want Ricado to ride him in the Wednesday afternoon race."

"You want him to! It's not your horse."

She flushed. "But I know the horse. Ricado can make some real money on him." She looked mischievous. "Take a chance on him yourself, Bart."

"I'll have no woman telling me what to bet on. There sure is a whale of a lot of difference between you and Annie."

"Her name should be Alice," Linda murmured.

Bart glared, "Why?"

Linda sang in a strong and beautiful voice,

" 'Oh, don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?
Sweet Alice with eyes so brown
She wept with delight when he gave her a smile
And trembled with fear at his frown.'

But that sort of girl is out of date, Bart. Men want a wife who's a real helpmate and a real companion . . . and . . . and a real lover."

Bart stared. "So you think that's what that sissy in the East wants. Somebody ought to tell him you're two-timing him, with a horse as a go-between."

"Write him anything you like, Bart. You can't make trouble between Eddie and me."

"When you taking the black in town?"

"Tomorrow. In time to lunch with Ricado; we talked over the phone this morning."

"Hmm! Well—I got business in town tomorrow. Where you lunching?" She told him. "I'll pick you up after lunch, Linda, and take you to the show. I sort of can't help liking you, for all your independence."

"But Annie—"

He interrupted impatiently, "You know mighty well she would sit up there and scream every time a horse tried to kill somebody. When's the race?"

"That afternoon, and it's nice of you to take me, Bart. Your bark is worse than your bite."

CHAPTER III

Fanatic in Black

LINDA was a trifle late in arriving at the table for two which Ricado had reserved and was holding down in the White Buffalo restaurant. He wondered uneasily whether she would stand him up, then reproached himself for the thought.

Shorty and Curt Turnage occupied seats at a table nearby, and Shorty was holding forth to Turnage on the subject of the mysterious dark shadow of a man who had now been chased twice for trying to turn loose the rodeo horses.

Turnage listened sullenly, then sneered. "Your mystery meddler is probably just a tall tale of yours," he remarked.

"Let me tell you, Curt," began Shorty sharply, then broke off as Linda came quietly into the room. She was a thing of such grace and young loveliness that Shorty forgot Curt and absorbed her with his eyes, sighing when he saw Ricado spring up and lead her to his table. Shorty turned his gaze reluctantly back to Curt and began again:

"If you don't believe about that mystery feller, you will when you find your string wanderin' loose. Seems he don't want to steal stock, he just likes to see 'em regain their freedom."

Curt shrugged and drank coffee, his air still that of one listening to a dubious yarn.

The mercurial Shorty forgot the mystery meddler and began on a topic he thought of general interest.

"Curt, I didn't know till this mornin' at assembly that right over in the next valley a little old circus was foolish enough to open in competition with the rodeo. Imagine that! Came into Vendome on that little jerk-water line they got over there in Buzzard Valley.

"Of course it hasn't paid a profit. They got a trick elephant and maybe a bobcat or two and some acrobats. They—" He broke off, gaping.

"What's the matter with you?" rasped Curt.

"You didn't believe about that mystery meddler. Hanged if he isn't right outside that side door! He's comin' in."

Ricado was paying no attention to Shorty's gossip for his mind was on Linda, and the verse-writing fellow in the East whom she must love or she wouldn't be engaged to him. But perhaps she had been hasty, mistaking liking for

loving. No doubt he had paid her marvelous compliments and women liked pretty words. If he, Ricado, could get her mind off this poet, she might come to realize she didn't really love him—just enchanted with his verse. The thought was comforting.

Shorty's hoarse whisper caught his ear, "Ricado! Look in the doorway. I'm sure that's him."

Glancing at the tall man framed in the doorway, Ricado had no idea what Shorty's "him" meant.

The stranger advanced to Shorty's table and quietly stood there, tall, thin, with long black locks floating over his shoulder and a long black beard sweeping his chest. He fixed darkly reproachful eyes on Shorty and declared in a loud firm voice:

"You are of those who give no heed to the sorrowful sighing of the prisoners, the unhappy horses which you and your kind hold captive."

His eyes were hypnotic, disturbing Shorty, who said angrily, "If all human beings had as good a time as our rodeo horses, they'd be lucky. You tried to turn 'em loose."

"And I may try again," interrupted the mystery meddler. "For I am the Liberator and the time will come when all the captives will be set free and will have no masters."

"You are the guy who turned loose all Miss Tillie Lou's canaries. Those little birds will freeze, come winter."

TO Shorty's surprise, Curt Turnage, who had been cynically eyeing the Liberator, drawled:

"Over there in Vendome, in Buzzard Valley, not more than ten miles from here, there's a circus with suffering elephants tied by one foot, and a cage full of imprisoned bobcats. But you'd be too big a coward to loose those elephants; you just haven't got the sand. You're a lot of hot air!"

The mystery meddler drew himself up, his eyes flashing with insult and with anger. He folded his arms, struck a majestic pose and said loudly:

"Fool! You know little of my courage . . . which has never failed."

He turned on his heel and stalked out. Curt looked maliciously pleased. "I know the feller who owns that circus. I'd like to see him lose his elephant. I think it's likely he will now. I damaged that crank's vanity. I— What do *you* want?" Curt was rasping at a Mexican lad.

"Thees letter, señor. From thees post office. Especially deliver. To Señor Curt Turnage in rodeo. I hunt till I find you; she ees not to answer but she is to sign."

Curt signed. Ricado, glancing at Curt, hoped the contents would put him in a better humor. The messenger vanished.

Ricado returned to conversation with Linda, finding her not only lovely but swiftly intelligent and blessed with a pretty sense of humor. But suddenly her smile faded. She moved her head very slightly toward Curt's table.

Ricado glanced again at Curt; he was finishing a letter of one page, and his face was white and set, his mouth grim, his eyes narrowed. Ricado saw him read the page twice as though he could scarcely believe what was written. Then his gaze left the letter and sped to Ricado and Linda.

His look embraced them both and for a second Curt's face was that of mortal hate . . . then his self-control came sharply back. He folded the page, restored it to the envelope and put the envelope inside his vest.

He looked at Shorty and grinned, but that grin was a ghastly failure.

Linda hadn't caught Curt's malign look; their waiter had interposed, and very soon Ricado was telling himself that Curt's malevolence couldn't have included Linda, because he had no grievance against her. As to what Curt felt toward Ricado—that didn't worry Ricado. It was just one of those things. He turned to Linda.

"How'd the nine o'clock audition go?"

"Oh, Ricado, I'm to sing tonight."

"Fine. I saw Bart in town."

"He brought me in. He's doing some

buying. He's taking me to the show this afternoon." She glanced at Curt who was rapping on a tumbler with his knife. The waiter hurried up.

CURT called for his check, paid it, rose and, without glancing at either Ricado or Linda, left the room. The waiter threw a disgusted glance after him for the hopeful servitor had gotten no tip.

"Curt's a fine lookin' chap," drawled Shorty, talking across to Ricado, "and he don't lack for gals runnin' after him, but somehow he always puts me in mind of a Gila monster. Bet if you skinned off his hide and saw his real self, it would look like one of those Gilas."

Linda laughed. "You think our real selves look like animals, Shorty?"

"I sure do," Shorty said seriously. "All folks are disguised animals—wolverines, badgers or maybe crows."

Linda protested, "Heavens, Shorty! Do I look like a badger? My real self?"

"You look, your real self looks—" He paused, regarding her keenly.

Linda urged, smiling, "Don't keep me in suspense, Shorty."

"Your real self," Shorty said gravely, "is one of those mourning doves that grieves to itself about the suffering of others."

"But that sounds awfully dull, Shorty," she said, laughing.

"Solomon," Shorty said with the same gravity, "liked a dove and described her mighty nice."

Linda, who had recently read the chapter, blushed rosily. Ricado grinned.

"I aim to read that," he announced.

Linda changed the subject. "Ricado, I made a real venture this morning. Went to the bank, and drew out my last penny. What Mary needed was completed, you remember, and so I'm betting every cent of what is left on you and Jett in this afternoon's race."

"Which," commented Shorty, "doesn't sound like a mourning dove. Reckon you're half eagle—flyin' high. You playin' a hunch?"

"I'm playing an old verse:

"'She either fears her fate too much
Or her deserts are small
Who will not put it to the test
To win or lose it all!'

Only in the verse it's *he*."

"You bet on your hunch but I'm bettin' every cent I got on what you know about that gelding," Shorty said with a satisfied, shrewd air.

Ricado looked uneasy. "That horse is notional," he said slowly. "High strung and nervous. He's never had a workout, never has run in a crowd, never had people yelling and bands playing. No telling what he'll do. You two aren't right bright."

They only laughed at him.

CHAPTER IV
Black Thunderbolt

THE afternoon show was going well. There was a large and responsive crowd watching. It had applauded Curt's fine bronc riding.

Ruin had lamed himself yesterday—just after Ricado had stayed with him to the signal, so that one battle with Ricado would be his last public appearance for the next week or two. But the horse Curt rode was bad enough.

Ricado had shown some brilliant work in his roping. The steer wrestling and trick riding elicited cheers. But this afternoon, full as the program was, the peak of the show—to most people—would be the race. It would be a hurdle race in which outsiders were allowed to compete with the rodeo riders for a purse of three hundred dollars.

Outside the arena lay corrals and stalls. The show, or most of it, slept in Tejon, but near the arena were limited sleeping accommodations, a kitchen and a mess hall for those who didn't want to eat in town.

In one of the rodeo stalls, where he

was being held for the race, Jett snorted, fussed and stamped.

The big black gelding hadn't liked his new stall, didn't like the wrangler who looked after him, didn't like the feel of two new shoes on his forefeet. He was generally annoyed and discontented.

He didn't like Ricado's saddle when the wrangler led him out and saddled him. It was heavier than the one Linda rode. It felt strange.

He bit at the wrangler, reared and tried to break away. The wrangler cursed him liberally for a crazy bundle of nerves, adding:

"Hanged if I put any money on you. All you got is a flighty disposition. Them who bets on you will sure get stung." Then, as Ricado came striding up, ready to mount for the race, the wrangler growled, handing him the reins, "Joy go with him, peace behind him!"

Ricado laughed and swung up into the saddle. The black reared wildly. Ricado brought him down. Other mounted men joining them, looked critically at Jett. One commented:

"Funny that in a temper, he don't buck."

Curt rode up. He flung at Ricado, "You riding that black in the race? Thought you left him out with Ettock."

"I'm riding him in the race," Ricado said drily.

Curt Turnage threw him a look of sheer fury. "Why didn't you tell me Jett would be in the race? It's too late now."

"You mean you'd have bet on him?"

"Of course!" Curt snarled. "He couldn't help—"

Curt swallowed the rest of the sentence as on signal they moved through the main entrance and tried to get in line, with a dozen other horses, for the race.

The black gelding danced, fretted, tried to bolt, and held up the start. He reared, plunged, whirled completely around. Then just as the starter felt ready to shoot him, he suddenly became haughtily sedate, stood in place with a quietly scornful air.

The starting gun cracked. The horses leaped forward and in fifty yards Ricado felt as though he were trying to rein in twenty greyhounds.

The black gelding took the lead and fought the bit for faster running but Ricado restrained him, more than satisfied with his speed.

Soon the first hurdles loomed up.

Jett whirled away from his; he had never taken a high jump in his life and saw no sense in it. He was thirty feet from the hurdle before Ricado got him back in line and rushed him at the obstacle again. But just as the black seemed about to take off, he refused, rearing instead, a trick that would have thrown many riders, but Ricado's knee grip made him one with the horse.

His quirt stung the gelding, after he had again set the black for another rush at the jump. Like an angry prima donna who in a tantrum finally decides to sing, the black charged at the hurdle, skimmed over it, began to pass one horse after another.

GOLD is where you find it—and so are races. For like gold they may be just anywhere, perhaps on a measured length of road with only a few hundreds watching, perhaps in a rodeo arena; perhaps on some great race course.

Like gold, races are just as exciting in one place as another, for the heart of all races is the fierce suspense of competition. That suspense, that wild rise of pulse, touches the cowboy betting on a quarter horse as keenly as it does a plutocrat betting a thousand or so at the Derby.

For in all races all horse lovers become one with the chosen racer; personal tomorrows and yesterdays are forgotten as the horse, center of song and story for thousands of years, tries for victory.

Cleverer and cleverer grow the inventors of cars and airplanes, but who cares? Man always, in his heart, returns to that which has life, beauty and a speed fitted to his own personality. To watch a moon-aimed rocket more than once—what a

desperate bore that would be! For the rocket rushing or lying still is always a dead thing—and man craves life.

Wherever the rodeo stopped, Manager Thorne always arranged for one race in which the surrounding county might participate if it wished—and it always wished—because that guaranteed it was no mere stage race, which could be prearranged as to winner. The purse of three hundred dollars was there for the taking by the best mount, in the show or out of it.

Six county horses had been admitted, and with the rodeo six the spectators had an exciting eyeful to watch, but Ricado told himself that the temperamental whirlwind he rode couldn't miss winning. He would have felt that Curt might do something treacherous, injuring the horse, but undoubtedly he still wanted the black, so why should he damage it? Then, on the heels of the thought, came a surprise trick illustrating that demoralization in a horse can be created without damage to the animal.

Ahead of him something flashed brightly, as sunshine struck the steel of an arrowhead. It buried itself in the ground beyond horse and rider, harmlessly enough so far as the arrowpoint went.

But in back of the arrowhead a small bunch of lightweight firecrackers were beginning to explode. The crackers went off wildly, fizzing, sputtering, hissing closely in front of the oncoming black gelding.

A roar of wrath went up from the crowd over the ugly trick. The black shied frantically aside and tried to bolt, but with strong, masterful hands and a caressing voice Ricado got him past the crackers.

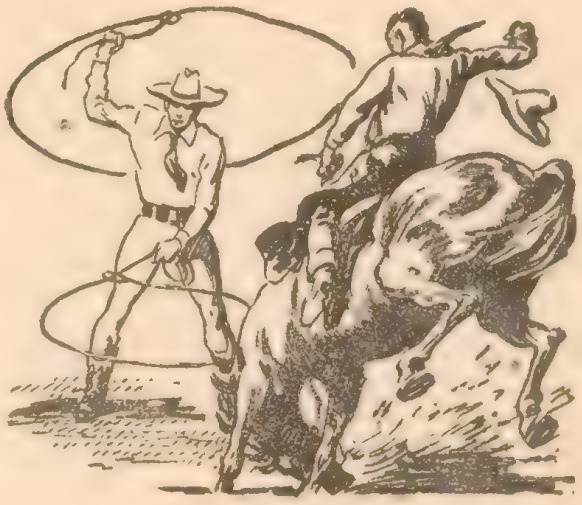
Yet even when the exploding firecrackers were left behind, the black was hysterical. Ricado wondered—what would he do at the next jump?

Horses, like coquettes, are unpredict-

[*Turn page*]

"Senor, It Is the Saddle of a Murdered Man, and Whoever Rides It Will Meet—Death!"

THAT was the grim warning addressed to Saladar Slim—rodeo star—when a young Mexican friend saw him accept the gift of the silver saddle from lovely Camilla Johnson. But Saladar just grinned—he wasn't the superstitious type, anyway, and he appreciated Camilla's beauty too much to question her motives. As time went on, however, Saladar discovered that possession of the saddle DID put him into danger—why, he could not explain. And so, while he fought for victory in the arena and happiness in love, the mystery of that saddle was always in his mind—and he found the answer sooner than he expected! You'll thrill to Saladar's exciting exploits and his tussle with hidden foes in a rip-snorting, swift-moving epic of rodeo action—



THE SILVER SADDLE by CLINTON DANGERFIELD

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING ROMANTIC NOVEL!

able. The black gelding suddenly decided that here had been enough fooling, but the interlude of firecrackers had cost so many lengths that Ricado now felt only too sure the big chestnut Curt was riding would romp in first under the wire.

That the crackers, harmless to the horse but ruinous to his race, was Curt's work, through some bribed and skilled bowman, Ricado didn't doubt. Proof of this could probably never be obtained.

Curt's chestnut was a length ahead of a mare which was running second, a showy, fast animal which Bart Ettock had entered, with one of his cowboys up. The cowboy still had hopes.

Looking back, the cowboy saw the black gelding skimming over his hurdle, saw him land lightly and begin to eat up the distance.

IT WAS now or never for Ricado! He gave the black his head, spoke to him in low, urgent tones and found himself intoxicated by the smooth, astonishing speed of his mount. For the time being it seemed as though such a horse could never tire. He went like the wind past the bunched also-rans, picked up the racing third, a rangy dun, caught up with Ettock's mare, left her—and now Ricado rode stirrup to stirrup with Curt Turnage.

Their faces were expressionless but their eyes met and Ricado was amazed again by the hate and malignity in the glance Curt shot at him. Then both men looked ahead. Could Curt really feel so deeply about an unproved horse? A gelding of obscure lineage? A horse flighty and hysterical? Then Curt fell inches behind him and, by a head, the prize-winning Jett rushed under the wire and was with difficulty quieted down.

Curt wasted no time in felicitations to a rival. He galloped out of the arena with the other horsemen.

That the winner had earned the purse several times over was the general consensus of opinion. Bart Ettock, watching the race with Linda, was secretly kicking himself over not having bought the horse from Linda himself. He growled to her:

"Had you really no idea of that gelding's speed?"

"No, Bart. I never dared to let him have his head, he's hard-mouthed and I felt if he ever got away with me, no telling where he'd stop."

"Well, you mussed up things, being such a coward!"

She retorted, "No, I haven't. Jett's gone to a wonderful master. I wish the race hadn't been in the arena. Then I could have been there to congratulate Ricado at the finish."

Ettock sneered, "Don't get too enthusiastic about that cowboy. Eddie is clumsy with horses but he's good with a gun—and you're engaged to him. Wearing his ring."

She shrugged, then laughed a little.

Ettock scowled, "Women! And tonight you're posing with this Ricado in that scene—what do you call it?—Spirit of the West! Reckon you know they've been having trouble with the lights?"

She murmured, "Yes. It's really trouble at the power house in Tejon, but they say it'll be all right tonight. I wish Annie had come with us. I hardly breathed while that race was going on."

"She'd rather try a new cake recipe than see twenty races." He added bluntly, "Why don't you set your cap for this feller, Ricado? If you'll rope him in I'll make a tophand of him on the ranch here. He can feed you on that, and I'll help him build a cabin for you two on my place."

She flushed, then said with much dignity, "You are forgetting Eddie!"

"Blast Eddie! I know he's got money, plenty, but . . ."

She interrupted, "But he wouldn't make a tophand. You're just thinking about yourself."

"I know a real man when I see one."

"If he's a real man, it's for him to do the roping," she said in the same low tones, her head going up proudly.

"You had lunch with him," muttered Bart. "I hear you and him will repre-

sent the West in that Spirit of the West song tonight. What's he going to do? Gallop around and shoot?"

"What nonsense! He's merely background, sitting his horse and keeping quiet while I sing. We're both to be in frontier costume. You'll stay for the night show?"

"To hear you squalling Thorne's song? I sure will not! How you aim to get home?"

"Ricado will ride home with me."

That he was going to be merely representative background in the tableau pleased Ricado much better than any active part. Quietly sitting his horse, he would be at leisure to listen as she sang and to fill his eyes with her loveliness.

LINDA wanted Jett in the tableau but the arena director promptly ruled him out as being far too flighty. What was needed was a fine but patient horse who would stand statuesquely.

Ricado selected his big roan and that selection was approved.

Manager Thorne rehearsed them after the afternoon show. He went around with a properly expressionless face, but in his heart he sat on the anxious bench as any poet would who was getting his first public presentation.

The accompaniment and the air had been the work of the rodeo band leader, but he was gloomily sure that the manager and the lovely singer would win all the laurels.

Ricado was delighted with rehearsing because that threw himself and Linda closely together; both of them were pleased that Curt Turnage with his sarcasms wasn't around.

The preliminaries went off well. Linda and Ricado had supper together and then, surprisingly soon, it was show time.

The night show opened under a sky tent glittering with stars, not a cloud visible. But Manager Thorne and Arena Director Locke didn't think much of stars for lighting. They were duly thankful when, after some alarming flickering, the lights came on steadily and apparently would give no more trouble. But Thorne cursed the town of Tejon in his heart, fearing more obscurities.

Every seat was taken and the show went on brilliantly—contest after contest—to the music of the rodeo band, often broken by welcome applause from the spectators.

Ricado and Curt were the outstanding stars in the dangerous contests. Curt only came into the arena twice. When his steer wrestling and bulldogging were over, he didn't lounge in the arena to watch or fool around the main entrance. Temporarily he vanished, for, known only to himself, Curt had his own plans about that Spirit of the West tableau. Unasked and unseen, he would share in it.

In the baneful undertow of his resourceful and poisonous mind, a secret plan had formed. This girl, this Linda, should, unaware of it, be his aid in what he meant to do—his aid by focusing all eyes on her. Thanks to the amplifying system, her voice would reach everyone in the big audience.

Thorne had modestly set the song as the final feature of the night show. Often a last act in any show gets scant attention but in this case the *Tejon Daily Star* had widely publicized the singer and the whole large county was consequently deeply interested in the affair. A very creditable photograph of Linda had brought the outsiders into line also.

Now the arena cleared for the tableau. The lights were giving trouble again, so much so that the announcer begged the audience's patience with such fitful behavior.

WHEN they presently shone out brightly, the simple tableau was set—Linda standing on a small dais as the Spirit of the West while near her, but several yards behind her, Ricado sat his big roan.

The horse carried his sleek head high. His rider seemed part of him, a princely figure of Western youth. Horse and man

were so still they seemed cut of marble, but Ricado's heart throbbed fast as he gazed at the slender figure near him.

Near him—and yet very far! Really near would be to have her in his arms, where she belonged. Where Eddie belonged was somewhere at the North Pole where he'd freeze to death.

She wore a short huntress dress of pliant, finely tanned buckskin with long fringes on the skirt edges, and soft buckskin leggings above moccasins beautifully beaded. Her hair was a bright cloud touching her shoulders and her bare head was proudly poised.

Ricado moved his mount a little to the right that he might see her profile, making the change seem the fretting of his big roan although the horse was quite content to be still.

Ricado thought her profile as lovely as her full face. Ah, if we two were only in some sweet valley, far from all crowds, riding alone together, stopping at some bright spring. He jerked himself out of his wistful dreaming. The welcoming handclapping had ceased and the rodeo band was beginning her accompaniment.

The prelude gave the air and then the music sank lower. Her young voice, rich, thrilling and of fine volume, rose in heart stirring cadences as she sang in passionate praise of her West.

Her big audience paid her the tribute of charmed silence. She had had only a little training but she had a sensitive ear guiding her into natural but accurate placing, and the warm fire of her emotion charged the word West with magic. The amplifiers carried her voice to the furthest reaches of the tiers.

CHAPTER V
Jungle Demon

HOURS before the enchantment of Linda's song held her audience, in fact the evening before, that interlocking weaver of incidents which we call Fate was moving toward putting another, and new, actor in the arena, using the shadowy and secret mind of the Liberator.

The black garbed fanatic was full of good intentions. Yet it is said that hell is paved with good intentions, though you could hardly get the instigators to believe this. The Liberator had fixed convictions, and they could never be altered.

The evening before the song, he had slipped quietly into Vendome on the greatest mission he had yet attempted. He believed himself purely altruistic, but as a matter of fact he was spurred and driven by wounded vanity. Curt had taunted him with being afraid, Curt had treated him with biting contempt!

Well, Curt and everybody would get a surprise which would fetch all of them down a peg. They would be forced to look up to the Liberator.

He was not poor. His pockets were full of money and his mind was armed with an animal-like cunning. Born in Spain and highly educated, he looked like a second Don Quixote, although those he annoyed didn't call him by so mild a name.

The Liberator was a top notch zoophile, which is to say he had sympathy only for himself and for animals.

Animals gratified his vanity which was his dominant trait. For animals he would put himself to much trouble. In his shadowy mind he was certain the wild as well as the tame would understand what he did for them, and be proportionately grateful.

The Liberator went about his liberating, in the town of Vendome, with his own peculiar craft; he was clever about it. He'd only been caught once, that was in the matter of Miss Tilly Lou's canaries.

The circus was small, and disorganized by a quarrel between the two owners. Half of the employees had quit. The Liberator showed an intelligent knowledge of animals and readily got a temporary job as handy man. His deepest

interest was in the circus' dangerous star—a fine Bengal tiger.

The Bengal tiger's history was an evil one. He was a man-eater. In the Indian jungles he had developed a taste for human flesh. One night he was trapped by a native hunter, who sold him to an American collector.

Later, after the tiger had been brought to America, the zoo which had purchased him grew tired of his ferocious disposition and sold him to the small circus, which eventually had brought him in a wheeled cage to Vendome.

When the Liberator, who had proved diligent in his work around the menagerie, got a chance to clean around the cages, he turned loose a coyote and two bobcats, then lost no time in opening the Bengal tiger's cage.

The great yellow eyes stared at him ominously. From head to heels the tiger was a mass of wicked power but the Liberator had no fear of him, for the man-eater had recently been fed. After opening the door, the Liberator stepped back to view the Bengal's joy.

Instantly the huge cat leaped out, sprang on the Liberator and, with a single stroke of its armed paw, broke his neck. This happened in plain view of the horrified owners.

The tiger then jumped into some bushes and fled.

The owners had witnessed the tiger's release. It had all happened in a couple of seconds. When they found their new hired hand dead as several doornails, they wasted no sympathy on him.

THE Bengal made for the cool mountainside. When night came, as it did shortly, he went over the mountain and approached the rodeo grounds. He was hungry now and his terrible longing for human flesh sent him slinking toward where it seemed most accessible—the arena. The dimming lights were all in his favor as shadows closed over him.

When the Bengal turned noiselessly into an alley, he halted. There was a man ahead of him.

That man was Curt Turnage.

Since the arrival of that illuminating special delivery letter delivered to Curt in the restaurant, he had done some fast thinking, the sum of this being his decision that Ricado must die.

He could have hired a man to kill Ricado. But Curt felt that such an arrangement would leave himself open to blackmail, so he discarded the idea.

He decided to do the killing himself.

Next came the question of place. Ambushing a man in some lonely spot wasn't nearly as good a bet as most people fancied; it meant, unavoidably, tracks and clues, and the added risk that some soft-footed traveler might be, unseen, at hand.

On the contrary, crowded spots, such as big cities afford, or rodeos, are best because suspicion is scattered among so many.

Armed with a silenced thirty-eight, he, like the great cat, was now headed for the alley's end, which touched the arena fence.

His gun was inside his trouser belt. He drew it now and was glad that the ugly nip a horse had given him yesterday was on his left wrist. On his right it would have interfered with his shooting, for the bite was severe and had stiffened his wrist temporarily. However, it was doing well, which he ascribed to that known horseman's remedy—turpentine. The bandage was soaked in this pungent smelling fluid.

He stopped. From this spot he had an admirable view of his target, Ricado Smith. He meant to kneel and fire through one of the open spaces between the heavy planking of the rodeo arena fence.

The trouble with the lights was ideal for his purpose. They were running dim again, but a small special floodlight brilliantly picked out the singing girl, and Ricado on his horse, his back to Curt.

Linda herself would indeed be helpful in the murder because she had already gathered everyone else's attention. This

unconscious help grimly amused the killer.

CURT raised the silenced thirty-eight and took aim. The moment he saw Ricado fall, Curt intended to turn and slip rapidly away, heading for the fissure beyond the rodeo kitchen.

Down this deep fissure, where the cook dumped tin cans and other debris, Curt would throw the thirty-eight.

Now he had a perfect sight on his target. His bullet would kill, he felt sure.

He was about to fire when the Bengal charged him.

Curt heard the swift approach and wheeled. He got one brief horrifying glimpse of the great cat, then the Bengal struck him down, leaped over him and went on.

So tangled is life, so interlocked its incidents, that the wound on Curt's wrist saved his life. The reek of the turpentine-soaked bandage offended the great cat's nostrils and made him sure Curt would be sorry eating. Therefore the Bengal knocked him out of the way and sought more savory game.

Curt felt he had been saved by a miracle. He staggered up unhurt and saw the Bengal slink rapidly under the lowest fence rail, into the arena, and then move, half crawling in a crouch, toward the singing girl.

Curt thought fast.

If the Bengal attacked her, which seemed pretty sure, Ricado would try to save her. But Ricado was not armed. The old-time gun he had buckled on was not loaded. Therefore the Bengal would turn on Ricado and finish him off for Curt.

Curt thrilled with anticipated triumph. He felt no pity for Linda. There was a deep-seated reason for that, tied up with that letter. He fervently hoped that both man and girl would be slain by the Bengal.

Breathless he watched. The lights grew even dimmer as the striped death drew closer and closer to his quarry.

Having no conception that danger could possibly be near either Linda or himself, Ricado had lost himself in the beauty of both girl and song.

Spirit of the West! She was its embodiment in her proudly carried young head, her poise that had in it a hint of wings, her voice that rang with its faith in victory.

With such a girl as wife—ah, but she was engaged to a bookish fool in the East!

The alien, angry thought alerted him. He heard a faint, a very faint sound behind him and with what seemed a reasonless feeling of something wrong, he turned in his saddle and saw the menacing head, the crouching striped body advancing toward Linda.

Against this cruelest, fiercest and strongest of the whole feline tribe, Ricado had no gun. But he did have his rope. And in posing the actors in this singing group the Arena Director had insisted on numerous picturesque details, one of them had been that Ricado's lasso must be in his hand as though ready for a short cast. Ricado had shrugged and assented.

The Bengal had taken him horribly by surprise. There in the dim light, the crawling cat, mistaken by the few in the audience who noticed it for a big stray dog, was rising now for his charge, and looked impossible—unreal. He simply couldn't be there!

But that sense of unreality in Ricado's mind was too brief to be measured. Instantly he made his decision—and his cast.

The noose fell over the Bengal's neck, was jerked tight. Then the rodeo rider wheeled his roan, drove in the spurs and sent the big horse racing for the main entrance. At its heels came a spitting, choking, galloping mass of jungle dynamite. And in that moment the uneven lights came on fully, giving the big audience something to talk of for the rest of their lives! Then man and cat vanished.

RICADO had roped death out of the arena, but he had another problem

to solve. He could, by cutting his lasso, turn the infuriated tiger loose and escape from it on his fast horse; but that meant endangering many people. It seemed an unsolvable problem, like that of the ghost cowboy who rides forever with a roped mountain lion behind him.

Yet a solution of what to do with this man-eater, Ricado thought he had.

As out of the arena they rushed, Ricado headed his fear-sweated horse straight for that fissure down which Curt had planned to drop his murder gun. As he rode he thrust his opened pocket knife between his teeth.

The fissure offered a wide leap, dangerously wide, but Ricado thought the roan could make it. As they neared the yawning gap in the ground, Ricado cut down the roan's speed, taking the slack of his rope swiftly up. When they were at the lip of the fissure, he released the slack.

Then he lifted his horse to the jump.

The roan sprang frantically forward—anything to be miles away from something that smelled like a mountain lion. The slack was barely enough to free him from the man-eater's drag and the slack was taken up so fast that the tiger, clawing at the brink with no mind to leap, was in another second snatched over the lip into empty air.

He plunged downward! The horse also was on the verge of being jerked backward when Ricado slashed the rope and the roan came down safely.

Wheeling his mount, Ricado looked down into the abyss. But there was no sign of the man-eater, dead on the rocks, a half mile below—a bottom depth no man would ever see.

So swiftly had the whole incident passed, so much had Ricado been moved by trained instinct instead of thought's comparatively slow process, that he almost felt as though he had imagined the entire thing.

Then he grinned, remarking to his horse as he turned it to ride around the fissure:

"It was just one of those happenings you always think will hit the other feller—not you."

But the roan had only one idea—to hurry away from that place where he had last seen that cat!

CHAPTER VI
Rivers Are Deep

WHEN he saw the snarling man-eater roped and hustled out of the arena, Curt Turnage had no doubt that Ricado would find some way to dispose of the tiger. Curt pocketed his gun and stood still, in the grip of furiously unpleasant emotions.

Instead of killing or injuring Ricado, the big cat had brought victory for Ricado who had roped it and Linda who had kept her courage and had gone on singing in unshaken tones, preventing a panic.

Curt smoothed his face into an expressionless mask and slipped unseen from the alley. He would pretend astonishment when told about the incident.

A superstitious feeling arose in him that Linda was Ricado's protecting angel. For that reason she must be slain first. But the deed should be most carefully planned—and surely his own secret and brilliant mind could do that planning right.

He felt what he considered a childish reluctance about injuring Linda. Finally he decided his purposes might be accomplished without killing her. But that idea had its difficulties. However, he would try it.

To that end early next morning he drove out to Bart Ettock's in a buckboard with a pair of fast ponies.

Bart was on the piazza talking to Linda, who was sewing. Curt drove in front of the steps, gave a smiling good morning, was asked up cordially by Bart. But Curt shook his head. There was, he said, no time. He spoke to Linda, lifting his hat:

"Is there an old woman you're interested in named Lucinda Allen who lives across the river?" His tone was smooth and pleasant. "I heard somebody say there was."

"Why, yes." She was surprised by his interest. "She lives miles from here."

Curt said urbanely, "She sent an urgent message to you. I just happened to meet her messenger. He seemed sulky about having to ride out here, and I took over. The words were, 'Come at once. Dont fail me.'" He smiled. "Maybe she wants to make a will in your favor! Or maybe the messenger played a joke on me?"

"Oh, no, no! No joke. She's over there and I must go at once. I'll have to swim my horse across." She paled.

"No. That's why I drove over. The river's full. I've got a skiff right where you cross, tied there. I'll row you over. That fellow said her house wasn't a quarter mile from the river. We can walk it. I'll bring you back."

"Oh, you are kind. I must see someone in the house. I'll be right with you."

He watched her hurrying into the house and mopped sweat from his forehead. He thought, she's never heard of what I called her at the auction. She likely doesn't know there was any trouble. I wish there was more time before that parade.

Bart Ettock said drily, "No question of wills; old Lucindy is a pauper. Linda is a fool about old beggars."

Curt thought, with a flash of satisfaction, how efficiently he had squelched two months ago an ancient dame who had tried begging from him.

In five minutes Linda and he were speeding off in the buckboard. In the back was a basket into which Linda had hurriedly thrown supplies for her ancient protegee.

THE buckboard team was fast. Curt handled the ribbons expertly. The air was fresh and cool. Moreover, Turnage was exerting himself to be charming.

He said sadly, "I've had some losses recently, heavy ones—valued friends. It made me ill-tempered for a time, but I'm getting over it. I've been sort of on edge with Ricado but really I think the world of him. A splendid fellow!"

She was pleased. She agreed warmly, then added, "I'm so happy today. I've had a long distance call saying my girl friend went splendidly through a dangerous operation and will get well."

Curt complained, "I haven't been so well lately. But then a rodeo rider never gets any sympathy. We're supposed to be made of iron."

"I'm sorry."

"Dizzy spells. Can't understand why." He fell silent. Another mile and they reached the river at a point where she saw the skiff tied.

"So lucky I happened to plan a little fishing and hired the boat yesterday," he said, smiling as he helped her into the skiff and carefully set in the basket. He tied his team off the road and got smoothly into the boat with the ash oars he had taken from the buckboard. He began to row swiftly and well, but in the river he held the skiff still, muttering: "My head—it feels queer. It'll pass."

She looked uneasily at the water. "The river is so wide, it must be shallow here."

He rested on his oars, holding the boat comparatively idle. "On the contrary, the water's deep. Drowning deep. But you swim, of course?"

"I should have learned—I didn't." Was there something strange in his gaze? No—just fancy.

He commented lightly, "Too mad about horses? But that's like a lot of women—going loco on one particular sport. I'd heard you were afraid of the water."

"I hadn't time for too many outdoor distractions. Can't we row on, Curt?"

They faced each other; she was sitting in the stern. He smiled at her. "I need a little time for talk. Uninterrupted talk. This is an ideal spot for it. Just we two—alone. I hear you're engaged to some sissy in the East, but it can't be serious."

"Please row on. My personal affairs wouldn't interest you." Linda was growing vexed. He stared keenly at her.

"More than you think, darling," he said. "I'm in love with you. I loved you at sight. I make quick decisions and—"

She interrupted him, "Something you say to every girl, I suppose. Please, Curt, be sensible! I'm in a hurry."

"Don't you know any of the great love stories—love at first sight?"

"This is all so useless, Curt. I know you're only being modern; you think girls like such nonsense. I don't. I'm getting impatient. Please row us on over."

He scowled, bit his lip, looked uncertain. "Seems you aren't easy to court. I wonder—" Was there a threat in his voice?

She smiled at him, "Don't wonder—row!"

He stared sullenly at her, his eyes uneasy. "Don't you find me *at all* interesting?" She heard again that undercurrent of menace in his tone.

She thought, I only imagine that. He wouldn't harm me anyway. I'd better be frank with him and end this silly stuff. She said aloud and levely, "Curt, I could never love you. I don't even like you."

HE CUT her off violently, his vanity offended:

"Because you've gone besotted over two-timing your Eddie with Ricado River Smith. You're blushing at his name. Well, that settles it! You'd always be hunting somebody new."

She laughed. "Yes, you'd find me a very fickle person. Now please, Curt, stop fooling and row." Her feeling of menace from him had vanished. She looked grave. "All this time poor Lucinda is waiting and worrying!" Then anxiously, "What's the matter, Curt?" For he was clasping his forehead. "Speak, can't you?"

"Dizzy! It's terrible—coming in waves!" He staggered up, wavered, crumpled on the gunwale amidship and went over the side, head down.

She cried out, reached for the oars, got one. The other floated in the water. She looked wildly for Curt. He suddenly appeared at the boatside and clung to it, calling, "Help!"

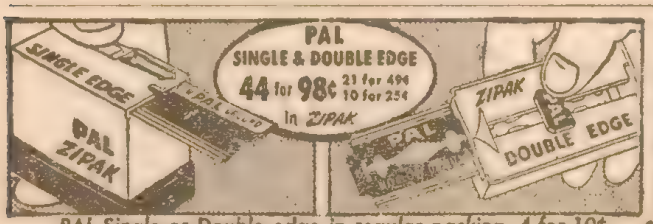
She rose, lurching toward him in her inexperienced haste, dropped against his hands, adding her weight to his. The light craft instantly capsized.

She came out from under the skiff, but only by luck, for she was thrashing the water in the blind panic which the drowning feel. Her choking scream was Curt's name.

Turnage came up on the other side of the boat and coolly floated. It shouldn't take long now; and then he would get the body back to Ettocks, looking properly miserable about it.

Back in town, Ricado had risen extra

[*Turn page*]



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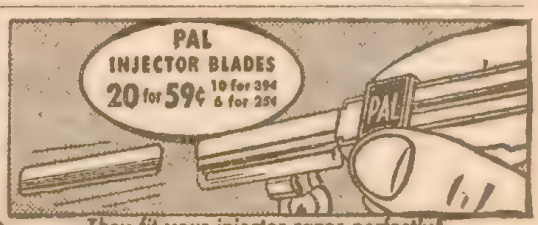

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early that morning because he could not sleep. It had come on him suddenly, and with a sense of shock, how soon he, as part of the rodeo, would be leaving Tejon and—Linda!

When rodeo time here came round again Linda would be married to the verse-writer whose cheap looking ring adorned her engagement finger. Married to him unless by an abrupt and whirlwind last-minute courtship she might be made to feel a rising interest in one Ricado.

This was a slender hope, but when he finished a hurried breakfast he decided to take the first steps along love's uncertain path. She must ride with him this morning.

At the town livery stable, where he now had Jett locked in a box stall, he was welcomed by the stableman who liked him.

"Done seen something queer this morning, Ricado. A rodeo star hirin' a pair of ponies and a buckboard! Thought they lived and died in the saddle! But this here Curt he wants the pair smart-lookin', ditto the buckboard. He let drop he was headin' for Ettock's ranch. Reckon he's elopin' with Ettock's sister-in-law. They call her Lovely Linda."

Ricado listened with concealed anger. But he consoled himself with the certainty that Linda would refuse to go driving with Curt.

As soon as Ricado was out of town, he galloped swiftly toward the Ettock ranch, sure Curt would have been sent about his business by Linda. But on Ricado's arrival, Bart, down at the corrals, said briefly:

"You're too late. Curt Turnage came here with a buckboard and she's gone with him." He looked at Ricado with concealed approval, adding, "Linda just stopped long enough to tell her sister she was going."

"I don't understand that," Ricado said, half to himself.

"Who expects to understand what a girl will do," commented Ettock harshly. Then because he liked Ricado he told him briefly why Linda had gone with Turnage, and where and how they would cross the river.

RICADO stared. He said slowly, "That's kind of odd, because while I was having early breakfast, I heard some men at my table saying that old Lucinda Allen, across the river, died last night and the town would have to bury her."

Ettock grinned sardonically, observing drily as he lighted a cigarette, "Well, maybe he did know it, and just made up the message. They say the Devil laughs at lovers' lies."

Ricado rode slowly away, thinking hard. Looking after him, Ettock thought, "Like to have him with me. Real man. And here Linda's promised herself to that nincompoop in the East."

Meantime Ricado rode on in disquietude.

Two things aroused his uneasiness. First, the question as to whether Curt knew or didn't know that the old woman was dead. If he knew it, he had cooked up the message himself. Why?

Secondly, at the auction Curt had been knocked down for calling Linda an ugly name. Had he trapped her into a drive in order to find out whether that name had been justified? Curt was the wolf type; he had no ideals and never credited either man or woman with having them.

On the other hand he was not a fool; therefore he surely knew that if he crossed any line Linda didn't want crossed he'd get himself killed by Ettock. However savage Ettock might be with a woman member of his household, she was always under his armed protection so long as she lived in his home.

Reason was in Curt's favor, but when did reason ever stifle aroused suspicion? Ricado realized again that he looked on Linda as though she were his own. Abruptly he knew that her driving with Curt infuriated him, Curt being what he was, even though she would come to no harm.

He would catch up with them and tell

them the truth about the old woman. She was dead.

He touched his horse with the spur and raced forward, hoping to reach them before they crossed the river. It was not long, thanks to Jett's flying hoofs, before he saw the silver gleaming of the water.

But this was not until his road took a sharp bend passing out of the woods to run along the river. The buckboard was empty. He glanced at the river and for a second froze to his saddle. For the picture before him was a capsized boat, a girl struggling in the water, beyond the boat! On the near side, a man also struggling—a man whom Ricado knew to be a fine swimmer.

In the next flash of time Ricado's horse was plunging down the shore toward the river. As he raced, Ricado tore off his boots, his vest, tossed away his hat.

Almost immediately in the water on the horse, he dived from the saddle. The black gelding swam on steadily toward the opposite shore.

Ricado cut through the water like a great fish. Then abruptly Curt came up from below and alongside him, seizing his arm and sputtering:

"Help me! Cramps! Drowning!"

Ricado turned in the water. He struck —hard.

Curt's fingers loosed instantly. Ricado swam on and came up to a little whirl of water where Linda had gone down for the last time. He dived through that whirl, open eyed, clutched at a dark blob and came up with her.

When he had gotten her to shore, had laid her on the sand, he glanced at the water for Curt. He was swimming feebly, yet making progress toward the beach where Ricado stood.

Ricado forgot him, turning swiftly to first aid for Linda. His horse had followed him and now stood beside him nuzzling him. Ricado lifted Linda and laid her across the saddle, draining the water from her lungs and thinking stubbornly:

She can't have drowned in that little time. Not possible.

HE WAS right. The water was scarcely drained when she moaned. He drew her off the horse and holding her in his arms saw with delight color coming back into her face, her dazed eyes heavily opening.

He laid her at length on the sand, pulling her dripping dress straight and smiling at her as he crouched beside her.

The river shore looked like a place of peace, the water flowing quietly by. The only sinister note was the scattered remnants of a wagon. Part of it had been used for a campfire, but one Curt Turnage had made the shore and was sitting hunched on the sand, staring out across the river as though he had completely forgotten the existence of the other two people on shore.

Ricado gave him no thought. He was safe, so why bother about him? For Ricado the world centered in the girl he had saved. *She* was safe and that was beautiful. But he felt baffled and aggrieved because he had held her in his arms and yet had not kissed those lovely lips. He was not kissing her because you didn't rescue a girl just to take advantage of her temporary helplessness.

Her gaze was intelligent now.

She asked faintly, "You—got me out?"

He was chafing her cold hands, crouching closely by her. "Yes. How do you feel?"

"Abominably weak. I was drowned."

"Not quite." He smiled. "What you need now is a drink. Curt always carries a flask. Lie still. I'll be right back."

Her eyes closed wearily. He rose and stood for a moment looking down at her tenderly.

Curt rose as Ricado approached him. Curt swayed slightly. He pulled out his hip pocket flask and walked back with Ricado to Linda and sat down beside her, putting his flask into her hands.

"Take a good nip!" Then as she took a couple of swallows, coughed over the

hot burning stuff and gave him back the flask, Curt said mournfully:

"Dizziness and then cramps will knock any man out, Linda. I'm sorry I nearly drowned you. Same as Ricado tried to drown me when I yelled to him for help, thinking you were lost."

Ricado looked down on him without comment, then seated himself on the sand ready to wait until Linda felt like moving. Curt made her drink again.

Then he said suavely, "I feel a sort of antagonism in you two toward me, but I'm about to do you both a kindness that ought to make us friendly. I sort of hate to be misunderstood. I'm telling you both a secret. It's about that black gelding I tried to buy." Curt rose, pocketing his flask. He stood with his right thumb hooked in his belt.

Both Ricado and Linda stared at him. Ricado thought, What kind of yarn is he cooking up now?

Linda said slowly, "Well?" She sat up, pushing back her wet hair.

Curt said, "In that railroad wreck there were two black colts. It was the scrub colt that was crushed and thrown close by the thoroughbred mare. Her colt was tumbled down to where the scrub mare lay dead like the other mare. Linda you brought home a colt sired by a racetrack king." He named a stallion still in the big money.

Excited, Linda rose, Ricado came up with her, helping her, but she was quite steady on her feet.

Ricado said drily, "Interesting, if true."

CURT said in an aggrieved tone, "There's plenty proof about the two colts being in the wreck. Linda knows that. But as to the blood identity —the gelding belongs to Colonel Rawley Consadine—you know who he is—and every colt in his stable is marked with a secret brand, a half of a design that must fit the other half he keeps locked.

"The half brand on this Jett is way up under his left haunch. One of the trainmen in that wreck sold me the secret and told me where the gelding was. All you've got to do is stupefy the gelding with chloroform, throw him and see for yourself." There was a note of truth in his story which made Ricado say slowly:

"If that proves true—"

Curt cut in on him, "It's true all right! And, after you got the horse, I could have sold out to Considine. As it is, we'll keep the secret among ourselves."

"Not long . . . if I find the brand as you say," Ricado said quietly. "I'll take the matter up with the Colonel and if it turns out as you say, he can pay me five hundred and take his horse."

"Could you be such a fool? That gelding may be worth his racing weight in gold!"

Impatiently, Ricado turned his back on Curt, "Linda, are you ready?"

Her piercing scream warned him barely in time to lift him into a sideways leap. Curt was so swift with his knife and sure of his target that the second Ricado turned his back, he had thrust at him with the knife he had worn inside his belt. Curt's fierce impetus, meeting empty air, threw him into a lurching stumble past Ricado, and Ricado was on him in a flash.

CHAPTER VII
Splinter of Fate

FROZEN with terror for Ricado, Linda watched the two men, locked together in desperate wrestling, sway, strain and struggle. Ricado's left hand was a steel vise on Curt's armed right, preventing any use of the knife. But with his right Ricado was trying to reach Curt's throat and choke him into releasing the knife.

She never thought of herself, did not realize her own peril. She would have witnessed the murder of an unarmed man and Curt could never afford to let her live.

She saw them go down on their knees, come to their feet again, heard the gasping intake of breath and the short involuntary grunts of fighting men.

Then Ricado got in the leg work he had been attempting and threw Curt Turnage hard, going down on top of him.

Ricado was still locked to Curt.

A queer shudder ran through Curt, then he lay still. To Ricado's astonishment, Curt's right fingers relaxed. With no difficulty Ricado seized the knife.

He could have killed Curt with it instantly but instead he sprang to his feet and stood staring down at Curt who had surrendered so easily, staring in amazement.

For in Curt's widened eyes there was shock, astonishment and terror. He gasped out, "Done for—with my own knife!"

Linda was now at Ricado's elbow. He turned to her:

"This devil is foxing. The knife never touched him!" He thrust the haft into Linda's hands. "Take it and move a away from here." But she didn't stir,

"He's paling, Ricado. He—oh Ricado! From that buried bolster in the sand a wicked splinter of broken jagged iron stuck up, still part of the bolster. He—he's on that! He fell hard, your weight was on him."

Evil as Curt had been, she could not check a shudder.

Ricado knelt and slipped his left hand under the defeated killer, drew it out again, his fingers bloody.

He said slowly, "I remember that big splinter now, and it's buried in him all the way." His right hand fingers settled on Curt's pulse; it was failing rapidly. Ricado said quietly, "Do you understand, Curt? Do you understand what happened?"

"I know I'm dying!" The voice was hoarse and broken.

"Maybe not. I could lift you, get you off that jagged point, and stop the bleeding."

"I'd die at once if you tried that. I've played and lost. Move away. I want—Linda."

Ricado rose, stepped aside. Linda crouched in Ricado's place. The terrified eyes stared up at her. Curt said, "It's cold—and dark—where I am going."

Linda leaned forward, and asked, "Tell me why you tried to kill Ricado and myself. What drove you to such a thing?"

He caught at the word drove. "Yes—I was driven. I had trouble—about a girl. She went home to her parents—to the same little valley where old Rosalee lives. I sent a pal of mine—a private eye, Orley—to settle with the girl . . . Orley nosed around for evidence against her." His voice was breaking with weakness.

RICADO knelt on the opposite side, managed to get out Curt's flask, lifted his head a little and fed him whisky, a few swallows, then let his head rest again.

Curt said more strongly, "Orley stopped at our pauper great aunt's house. She's my aunt too you know. Old Rosalee Robins."

"Yes, Curt. I know." She drew out her handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead, cold sweat. What could his broken words have to do with his attempts at murder?

"Pauper!" he muttered bitterly. "She wrote me begging letters that I never answered. All those letters were lies!"

"Lies, Curt?" Oh, no!"

"Her house looks shabby, yard full of weeds. But she had a maid—pretty one. Orley kidded her, got into the house. Orley is a wizard with women." He faltered, "Drink!"

The liquor gave him fresh strength, he stumbled on:

"Orley learned from the maid that the girl bothering me suddenly died. She had tried—never mind that. So he—kidded the maid and found out our pauper aunt has a—bank roll—fifty thousand dollars in savings. The old slut-fox."

"Oh, Curt, never mind money. Tell

me why you tried to kill us. Tell me before you go. Perhaps if I knew, I could forgive you!"

Dying as he was a flash of anger showed in his desperate eyes,

"You little fool, don't you understand? . . . Because you wrote to her, sent her money she didn't need, she's made a will leaving half she owns to you and half to Ricado, because you raved about him. She thinks you're engaged. Fifty thousand dollars. But if you two had been out of the way, I could still have made good with her. The lying old she-fox, she drove me to it! If she hadn't fooled me into thinking her a pauper, I'd have been sweet to her, bent her my way."

Linda listened in appalled silence. Curt faltered:

"I did try to marry you, Linda. You wouldn't have it. It's your fault, too. I'd have married you at once and—got rid of Ricado. Linda, it's dark now. Your hand—"

She caught one of his hands in hers, felt a convulsive pressure, heard a faint whisper that made no sense.

The whisper ceased. His body shuddered, relaxed and the silent, unerring power of Death stamped its insignia on his face.

Linda rose, turning away from the terrible change, but Ricado quietly loosed his own large neck handkerchief and laid it over the altered countenance. Then he drew the hands together on Curt's breast. Now Ricado got up and came to Linda who was staring at the river. She said slowly, "How peacefully it flows, Ricado; but under the surface it was horrible—like Curt's mind. But I don't hate Curt now."

"Normal people don't hate the dead, Linda. Their account is squared. But we are lucky to be alive. He wanted that fortune enough to have killed ten people for it. Now here's our plan: you take my horse, ride down to the town bridge instead of swimming him across the river. It's safer for you."

"Oh yes, Ricado!" She turned away from the river.

"Then cross over into town," Ricado went on. "Head for the sheriff's office, tell him what happened. One deputy must get the team, tied over yonder; the other must bring a wagon round by the town bridge and get Curt. I'll stay here with him until it comes. Then you see the rodeo manager and tell him why I won't be in time for parade."

He brought the horse for her. She swung up into the saddle. Her wet dress clung to her but she was not conscious of it. She had a nightmare feeling as though she had come through a hideous dream. Now she took courage to glance again at Curt's body, she seemed to hear his bitter broken voice again—"It's all your fault"—and her mind brought up remembrance of a saying heard from her schoolteacher. Unconsciously she said aloud,

" *'Qui s'excuse s'accuse!'* "

Ricado, tightening the curb a little, looked up, "What's that?"

"Who excuses himself—accuses himself."

"Yeah, and if he had lived he'd have spent it in forging excuses for more of hell's work. Yet I'm glad I didn't have to kill him, Linda; for once I rode with him, ate with him."

SHERIFF HARRINGTON readily accepted the statements of Ricado and Linda, who told him everything. But at the rodeo manager's imploring appeal, Curt's fall and impalement was "an accident resulting from a wrestling match." The real story behind Curt's death the general public never knew.

The rodeo itself had the truth but they were a tight-lipped lot where the honor of the rodeo was concerned. Not one of them had liked Curt, yet when it was discovered he had left little money behind him, the rodeo joined Ricado in giving Curt a decent grave.

Long distance talk between Ricado and Consadine, after the secret brand on Jett had been identified, resulted at once in the black being shipped to his

real owner. But a check for five hundred dollars came later from Colonel Consadine to Ricado, and a generous promise to Linda that half of the black's first purse, if he won one, should go to the girl who had saved him and bred him up.

Meantime, more than one of the rodeo outfit bluntly congratulated Ricado on the death of "his only enemy"; but grimly Ricado thought that he still had the worst of enemies, and a triumphant one at that, whom he had never seen—the detestable Eddie.

Now Saturday had come and Ricado would hear for the last time in the arena Linda's heart-moving voice. The last time actually, but he knew that it would forever haunt his dreams.

It embittered him all the more that his rescue of Linda from the invading Bengal had in the public's eyes thrown a groundless and tantalizing aura of romance around himself and Linda. The Tejon newspaper had declared that in rescuing his *querida* Ricado had himself been the actual Spirit of the West—unshaken by unforeseen peril, quick in dealing with it. He hated the paper, for now as he took his place near Linda for her song, the audience roared an ovation:

"*Viva* the sweethearts! *Viva* Linda! *Viva* Ricado!"

They had to acknowledge the applause and then the music, deep chorded, began the accompaniment and presently Linda's full, rich young voice sang:

The Spirit of the great West leads us on!
That Spirit shall your own high hearts inspire.
Come to the West! Beneath her splendid skies
You shall win all that you may most desire.
Come to the West!

Shoulder to shoulder Love and Courage build
Here on our mighty plains, our valleys wide.
Come to the West, where men are really free,
Come share our happiness, our shining pride!
Come to the West!

She ceased. Applause began again, the delighted Thorne checked it with an announcement:

"Because of your generous appreciation, these two will ride slowly around the arena near you saying not good-by but till we meet again."

Linda moved lightly into the saddle of the fine horse a hazer brought her, and she with Ricado started to pass quietly along the arena fence, looking up at the audience, which broke out thunderously,

"*Viva* the Spirit of the West! Happiness to you both! Till we meet again." And then a most unexpected thing—gifts came flying down from the lovers of romance and courage, impromptu gifts of gloves, sombreros, purses and jewelry, which the hazers gathered up for them.

Confused, thrilled, touched nearly to tears, Linda was not aware until they had left the arena of how little Ricado shared her emotion. For the instant they were out of sight, his face grew expressionless, cold.

She said hurriedly, and a trifle timidly, "Your train doesn't leave until ten tomorrow. Will you—please—breakfast with us at the ranch?"

He hesitated. Black depression was on him. The trouble with Curt had spoiled his already scant chance to court her. Even tonight when he might have ridden home alone with her, Bart had to change his mind. Bart had seen the night show, was going back with her. Breakfast! A heartless meal! He pulled himself together. He couldn't be rude to her, "Yes, I'll come."

IT WAS a tempting breakfast, little tasty sausages, eggs, fried apples, grits rich with butter, light and golden pancakes with honey, delicious coffee—with gentle Annie urging him to eat.

He ate for politeness—and tasted nothing.

Breakfast over, Linda said, "I've something to show you, Ricado. It's in the living room."

He followed her into it. Annie's canary

perched there in his cage. He greeted Ricado with a burst of trills so exasperatingly cheerful that Ricado almost scowled at him and much preferred the silent and hideous horned toad that sat inertly on the window sill.

She started to open a drawer in the little center table, but closed it and stood looking at him in a perplexed way.

"What shall I write to great aunt Rosalee Robins?"

"What you've always written. I think she's too old to be told about Curt. It might kill her. Keep on being kind to her, because that yarn the maid told that Orley about the old lady being rich likely hadn't a word of truth in it. Curt was loco to believe it—wishful thinking."

"I think so too," Linda agreed thoughtfully. "She'd never do anything so silly!"

That settled that. But years afterward, when a fortune came to them, the maid's reputation for veracity was established very excitingly. Meantime, Linda's thoughts moved from the subject; she opened the drawer again.

"Eddie just sent me his last photograph. I will show it to you."

"I don't want to see the blamed thing!" The words boiled out of Ricado before he knew it. He flushed deeply. "I—didn't mean to say that."

His gaze fell; he was ashamed. Then he lifted his eyes, for he must look at her as long as there was any chance, even if it was to meet the rebuke he deserved.

But she smiled at him, a smile of curving sweetness:

"You can say anything you want, in any way." She was grave again. "Words are funny things. I can't find a single one that would thank you properly for fishing me out of that river."

"Any Westerner would have done as much—for anybody."

She came closer. How lovely she was! How desirable! She was flushing a little, there was a slight confusion in the depths of her eyes. Her breathing had quickened. She said, a little breathlessly:

"Why don't you want to see his picture. Wouldn't you like to meet Eddie?"

HE ANSWERED her without words by catching her into his arms, roughly enough. His mouth crushed on hers hotly. He held her against his heart; his pulses leaped, but at her muffled cry he loosed her, stared at her in desperate self control.

"Good-by," he said hoarsely, turning away only to find her between himself and the door.

She was talking. At first he heard nothing for the drumming in his ears, and his intelligence was confused, by a storm of conflicting emotions.

The words, her words, came through, "Don't you understand? Don't you? Eddie told me to pretend we were engaged because it would—make things easier for me—so few girls here. But Eddie is engaged to marry someone else."

Ricado's gaze was incredulous; he couldn't have heard right, "You mean you're—free?"

She smiled at him, her voice was pure music to him as she said quietly, "Yes, I'm free. And Ricado, I love you."

He said, a little unsteadily, "Come to me, of your own free will, and kiss me."

She came swiftly, her lifted hands laced his neck, drew his head down—to meet a long, long kiss of mutual fire.

NEXT ISSUE'S STAR ATTRACTIONS!

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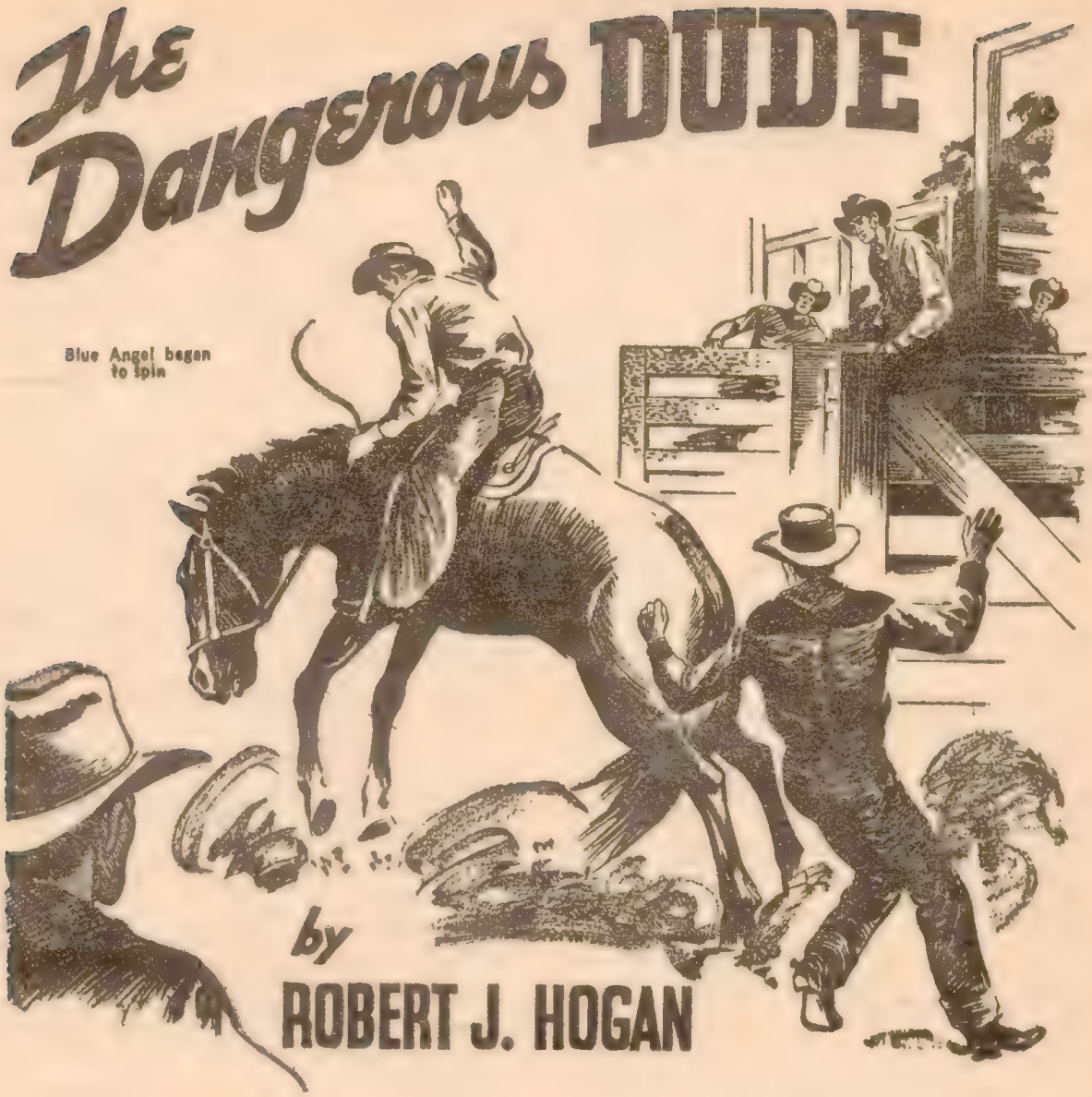
The Dangerous DUDE



by

ROBERT J. HOGAN

It took the prodding of unjust accusations for Bill Harris to prove he was something more than just a citified cowboy!

ANY place where you have lived and played and fought and had fun when you were a kid is usually a place to look back upon with relish as you grow older. And most men, if they are like Bill Harris, enjoy dreaming about the time they will go back and live again in those old scenes.

Bill Harris was doing that now. His pulse beat a faster rhythm as he stood on the step of the train and watched the familiar things of his boyhood come into view.

But the expectant pleasure began to fade as the train slowed. The old water tank beside the sweltering tracks was dirtier than ever and a lot smaller than he remembered it. The main street of Bowie Basin jiggled before him as rising heat waves made the

buildings ripple. Over a back street hung a dust cloud, motionless in the dead, hellish air, as if it had been suspended there since Bill Harris had left the Basin country with his mother after his father's death nearly twenty years ago.

The train jolted to a stop, and two women, obviously schoolteachers, and a portly middle-aged man stood behind him waiting to get off. One of the women said secretively, "I wonder if they've got any real good-looking cowmen at the Bar Q Dude Ranch." The other woman laughed a little, as if she hoped so.

Bill Harris groaned. He looked over the old station. It hadn't been painted in years. It wasn't quite the grand place he remembered it. The dirty yellow station at Bowie Basin had been a sort of stepping stone to the great outer world when Bill was a kid there.

He glanced to the right of the station, saw the open two-seater buckboard with a gray-haired, gnarled little man behind the whip stock. The buckskin team had Bar Q brands on their flanks. The man was Amos Jason, all right. Harris could see the likeness now. Only, as he remembered him, Jason had been a two-fisted, stocky cattle baron whose word was law over much of the Basin and whose hair had been raven black.

Harris got off the train, walked ahead of the other dudes heading for the two-seater buckboard. At least he would have one thing on the rest. He'd been raised in this country, and that gave him an edge, set him a little apart from these tenderfoot dudes. He'd know which side of a horse to mount and when he told old Amos Jason his name was Bill and he was Chawn Harris' kid grown up, Amos Jason would look over the son of the best bronc breaker of the Basin's old days with some respect.

He came up to Jason smiling with confidence, and Amos Jason, shifting a chew into the other cheek, studied Harris from under eyebrows as shaggy as two snowdrifts.

"How the Hades can a human look so white and anemic and keep breathing?" Amos demanded.

Bill Harris had to admit that he wasn't a robust figure. He had been shut up in offices and factories making money for years and he looked it.

As a kid he had learned saddle making in Bowie Basin and after his mother had taken him to Chicago to live with her folks, following his father's death, he'd taken that knowledge with him. He had built that knowledge into a big business for himself. He had meant to boast a little about his success as well as about being Chawn Harris' son.

But when Amos Jason made that caustic remark about his whiteness and the frail look of him, something rebelled within Bill Harris. He couldn't say, "I'm Chawn Harris' kid. I was brought up here on saddle making and bucking horses," because most folks would say, "You're sure a different man from your father." Neither would he say, "I'm Bill Harris, maker of the famous Harris stock saddle." Folks would laugh at the pale, overworked young city gent who made saddles for he-men.

So Bill Harris took the stab meekly, got in the back seat of the double-sprung buckboard and, sitting propped up on a rolled blanket between the two teachers, rode like that to the Bar Q.

FROM a distance, Amos Jason's Bar Q ranch was much the same as Bill remembered it. As they came over the ridge and rode down into the Basin he could see the buildings spaced about the same, with another barn added and a half dozen new, yellow board cabins back of the main house.

Drawing nearer, Bill Harris could see that there was a change. The barns that had always been painted a bright red were now weathered and gray. The house, once white with vivid green trimming, was dirty and peeled, and the green had faded.

There were a half dozen saddle horses in the pasture back of the corral. There

used to be half a hundred in the old days.

Words formed in Bill's throat to ask the question that had been in his mind ever since he'd received verification of his reservation for room and board at the Bar Q Dude Ranch. He had wanted to write back and ask, "What's happened to the big Bar Q spread that they've got to take in boarders to make a living?" He wanted to ask it now. But of course it was too personal a question.

He saw Jason's small, hard form straighten, saw movement inside the corral, and a cloud of dust formed in the clear air. He heard a girl scream, and then Amos Jason was swearing and whipping up his buckskin team toward the corral and where the bucking horse was and the dust and the screaming girl. Bill Harris didn't remember any girl around the Bar Q when he was a kid.

The teachers began to "Oh" and "Ah" and the middle-aged man on the front seat leaned forward and asked, "What's going on? Did someone get hurt?"

The buckboard swung sharply before the corral gate and Jason stood the team on hind legs and leaped down over the cramped front wheel. Bill Harris was off the teachers' laps and running behind Amos Jason.

"Uncle Amos," a girl screamed, "Andy's hurt badly."

Bill Harris could see her through the corral rails. She was slight, but strong. She was trying to lift a big man who lay prone in the dust, tugging ineffectually at his shoulders. At the other end of the corral a squealing black stallion was bucking and kicking.

Amos Jason was demanding to know what was going on and how come Andy was riding Hell Fire, or trying to ride him.

Andy was a big, raw-boned, angular-featured cow man. He opened one eye, then the other and said, "Has that black devil gone?"

The girl seemed relieved. She almost smiled. She was beautiful, looking like that, a little worried, a little happy.

Andy was getting to his feet. More dudes came pouring through the corral gate. Jason whirled, yelled, "Shut that dag-rotted gate or I'll run you off the place, you slick talking bustards."

The dudes scattered. Andy and the girl and Amos Jason headed for the gate, Jason saying, "We'll unsaddle Hell Fire later. Tell me what's been going on."

Andy was getting his breath. He said, "Well, the mail come and there was a letter from that rider you was sure you sewed up for the Juanita Rodeo next week. He can't come."

Jason's eyes shot sparks. "So you, you long-legged coyote, you was getting practised up to ride for my money? What the hallelujah you figure I'm going to do for a ranch foreman if you get your neck broke?"

That was the point where Amos Jason turned on his crowd of dudes boarding at his ranch and drove them for the main house while he talked to his niece and foreman in private.

Bill Harris took his bags to the cabin that had been assigned to him. He unpacked and came around to the ranch house veranda. He said to the tall, gaunt man with the too short levis and the sunburned nose, "What's this about a rodeo in Juanita?"

"As near as we can judge, this Juanita Rodeo is one big local fight around Bowie Basin between the five big ranchers," the man said.

"Four I heard," said a stout woman with bleached short hair. "One of the ranchers, Jake Lomax, I think his name was, had a man from his J X ranch who won the bronc riding contest and I heard he'd bet thirty-thousand dollars in cash against that man's Cross Y, and the man that owned the Cross Y, he lost his ranch, so now there's only four ranchers making big bets for that—"

"It'll be only three after next week," said the man with the sunburned nose. He lowered his voice. "I hear Amos Jason has bet fifty thousand that he'll have a winning man from his ranch."

"That doesn't mean the ranch'll go," an attractive girl in short embroidered riding skirt said in a blurred contralto.

"The heck it doesn't," said the man with the sunburned nose. "I was down at the Bowie Basin bank three days ago and I overheard talk that the bank has put a mortgage on the Bar Q—" He stopped speaking suddenly.

Amos Jason's niece stood in the doorway. Her face was a little pale for a young woman living on a ranch. She had been looking at the man with the sunburned nose but now she looked at the others and made a brave attempt to smile. "Dinner is ready." Her voice was very low and, Bill Harris thought, a little on the shaky side.

It was a good dinner, and afterward Bill Harris wandered out to the edge of the corral to let the smell of horses fill his nostrils and to get some of the cool night air into his lungs.

HIS SLEEP was fitful and troubled that night, full of Dora Jason's lovely soft eyes and worried voice. Even in his dreams he wanted to do something about it. It wasn't what he had come out to the Basin country for at all. He'd come for a rest and to get back to the place where he'd been raised as a kid. But Dora Jason was still in his thoughts when he woke up.

Back in the city he might have been able to say, "What's she to you? Don't let your sympathies run away with you." But out there in the clean Basin country he couldn't help wanting to do something.

"Of course," he said next midmorning as he rode alone toward the old home ranch, "of course there isn't anything I can do anyway so I might as well stop worrying about it." That should have ended it, but it didn't.

He rode past the old four-room ranchhouse that used to be the Bucking M—his home. He'd planned to go in and have a look around but there were clothes on the line running from a corner of the house to the old corral, and there was smoke coming out of the chimney and a little flaxen-haired girl playing near the door.

He rode on down toward town, turned around before it was too late and came back for lunch. Andy Donovan, Jason's ranch foreman, was hanging around the corral as if he'd been waiting for him.

"Seems to me you sit a horse mighty comfortable for a dude, Mr. Harris," Andy said.

Even then Bill Harris remembered his loss of weight and his pale color. Not wanting to mention that he had once lived in the Basin, he said, "I ride some in the city when I have time." He got off and turned the reins over to Andy and went in to wash up for the noon chow bell. He couldn't get out of his mind the way Andy Donovan had looked at him.

"Sure is some dirt around someplace and I'd like to know where," he said to himself.

He prodded the man with the sunburned nose that afternoon out in the shade of a cottonwood clump by the cool, gurgling creek.

"Turner, you seem to know what's going on around here," Harris said.

The man put down his book suddenly, and Bill Harris thought he looked startled. "How's that?" Turner asked.

"I said you seem to know the stories of the rodeo at Juanita and how the ranchers compete for high bets," Harris said. "I'd like to hear more about it. Seems interesting."

The gaunt man laughed. "Oh, you want to hear more about it." He laid down his book. "You kind of startled me speaking up like that. I was reading and didn't hear you come."

"Go ahead with your reading," Harhis said, turning to walk away.

The man motioned him back. "Don't mind talking at all. In fact, I was hoping I could stop reading and talk with somebody. You want to know about the rodeo next week at Juanita? What you want to know?"

"You said something about Amos Ja-

son recently mortgaging his place here at the bank for fifty thousand."

Turner glanced about to make sure no one was listening. "Not only that," he said, speaking low, "but Jason's going to lose this place sure as shooting."

"You don't mind my being curious?" Harris said. "Just how does it figure out he's going to lose the place?"

"Can't help it," Turner confided. "I understand he's bet the whole fifty thousand in cash against Jake Lomax of the J X that a rider from the Bar Q will win the saddle bronc contest a week from Saturday at Juanita."

"Maybe a man from the Bar Q will win," Bill Harris said.

The man with the sunburned nose laughed. "Not a chance. Amos Jason was even figuring on swearing falsely about this rider he had coming, but now the man can't come."

"What do you mean, swearing falsely?"

"According to the rules any entry made by one of the big ranches must have been living and working for at least thirty days on the ranch he rides for."

Bill Harris frowned. "Amos Jason must be mighty desperate to go crooked," he observed.

"I'm telling you he's desperate," Turner said. "And I'm telling you he's about to lose everything he's got. Because the bank's aiming to foreclose the minute the time is up for payment of the mortgage."

Bill Harris nodded slowly. "I see." Then he said thoughtfully: "I judge Amos Jason's been losing on these bets before."

Turner grinned. "Three years running. Jake Lomax has a way of goading him into making a bet. Jason can't resist when Lomax gets him mad enough."

Harris got up from the rustic chair beside Turner. "Nice to meet dudes like you, Turner. You always make a vacation more interesting. Thanks."

He thought it over for the rest of that day. That evening he found Dora Jason sitting alone on the back porch knitting.

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said, her fingers moving steadily. "I hope you're having a good rest, Mr. Harris."

"Not as good as I might," he said.

She looked up quickly.

"You folks worry me," he said. "I've been hearing some things about the Juanita Rodeo next Saturday. I understand it's important to you and your uncle."

"Yes it is."

"I've been trying to figure out something," he said. "I understand you had a rider coming to enter the contest but now he can't come."

"That's correct," she said without looking up.

He hesitated. "Someone said something about rules for the contest. A thirty-day period that the rider had to work for the ranch he was representing?"

Her flying needles stopped. She paused, her hands motionless, and looked up at him sharply. "Mr. Harris—"

"Bill Harris if you don't mind."

"Mr. Harris. If you are trying to cast any cloud on my uncle's honesty, you can stop right now. Buck Brace who was coming to ride for us in the contest worked for us five years ago when he wasn't such a good rider as he is now. He was one of the cow hands before—"

"Before what?"

"Before Jake Lomax bought in the Basin and began deviling Uncle Amos and causing all this trouble." She picked up her knitting suddenly and went into the house.

Bill Harris walked out through the dark ranch yard. He whistled softly to himself. He hung on the top rail of the corral for a long time and studied the black shadow that was Hell Fire.

"I wonder if I could practise up enough before a week from Saturday to

win that riding contest that everybody around here has gone crazy over," he murmured softly, heading for his cabin.

IN THE morning he got a bronc saddled as soon as he could and rode down to Bowie Basin. There he went to the livery stable. The proprietor was a stout man with a middle like a beer barrel and a face like a heavy-featured moon.

"I'm looking for some horses to practise riding," Bill Harris said.

"Why don't you enter the saddle bronc contest next Saturday over to Juanita?" the man said. "You'll get plenty of bad ones there."

"That's what I want to know about," Harris said. "Where can I get horses like they'll have at the rodeo?"

The man looked over his slight build, his paleness, and said bluntly: "You don't look like no rider to me."

"I want to be able to ride by next Saturday," Harris said with as straight a face as he could hold.

"You crazy?" the man asked.

Bill Harris held a fifty-doller bill in his hand. "Where could I find some wild horses to ride?"

The man looked at the fifty. He blinked and coughed. He said, "For fifty bucks I'll tell you what you want to know and I'll give you a tip besides on who to bet on in the bronc riding." The man took the fifty. "Bet on Jake Lomax's entry from his J X ranch to win. The horses the riders'll try to ride Saturday are down at Colonel Deevers' place at Juanita."

"Thanks," Bill Harris said. "Now I'll give you a tip. Don't bet on Jake Lomax's entry to win Saturday because his entry's going to get beat."

He rode to the feed store, asked for some cockleburs. The proprietor pointed out back. He said, "We don't stock 'em now that we don't have to run any flax shredding any more. But you'll find plenty growing wild out back. Help yourself."

Bill Harris got a handful of the prickly things. He held them lightly so they didn't prick his hands as he rode his spirited bronc to the pound corral at the edge of town. There, he uncinched the saddle, put some of the burs under the blanket, snapped up the cinches tightly again and leaped on.

With the burs prickling his back, the horse squealed, shook and leaped in the air. He charged and stopped, trembling. Then he reared again, while Bill Harris raked him with his spurs. He reared and plunged and his front feet stabbed the hard earth.

Bill Harris rode him loose and free the way he used to ride with his father when he was a kid. Right hand high and left hand on the reins. He let the big bay buck once more, then he talked gently to him, dropped off the saddle, swung the horse around and released the cinches. He pulled out the burs, patted the excited animal and tried to calm him.

"We did all right and I'm mighty sorry we had to torment you that way but we'll make it up."

He rode to the general store, bought some lump sugar and fed it to the horse, patting the sleek neck and saying, "Now I hope we're friends again. But you see, I had to find out if I was still any good at all for hanging and rattling. With a little practise I might do all right."

It was dark when he got back to the Bar Q. A shadow stepped out from a cottonwood tree, and Harris' horse threw up his head, startled. A long arm reached out and a hand grabbed the bridle.

Andy Donovan's voice said, "Get down, you backbiting snake. You're going to get yourself a one-man beating you ain't going to forget for a long time."

Bill Harris burned a little. Still sitting his horse, he asked, "What's the idea, Andy? You jealous because I was talking to Dora Jason last evening?"

Andy Donovan stood beside him now. He caught hold of Bill's wrist, and his

grip was like a steel vise. "What did you say? When was you talking to Dora Jason?"

"Skip it," Harris said. "What did you figure you were going to hand a beating for in the first place?"

"Get down," Andy said. "You and me got a talk coming. This is going to take more talking than I figured. We'll talk and then, if you happen to be more man than you look, we'll fight it out."

Bill Harris felt the yank coming. He swung a leg off the horse, and Andy yanked on his arm at the same time. Harris came spinning down, managed to land on his feet, turned and faced the ranch foreman.

"What's got into you, Donovan? You gone crazy?"

"Uh-huh," Donovan said. "Crazy to beat your head off. Now start talking. What was you saying to Dora Jason last evening?"

Bill Harris was turning to fire. "That's none of your business, Donovan," he said. "If Amos Jason wants to know, I'll tell him."

"I'm asking for Amos Jason," Andy snapped. "I told him I was going to call you on what you been doing. Now I'm calling you because he said for me to."

"And what do you think I've been doing?"

"Spying for Jake Lomax to begin with. And what's this you was saying to Dora Jason?"

Bill Harris froze. "Hold on. Let's settle this first item you mentioned. This matter of spying for Jake Lomax."

"You're not fooling anybody," Andy said. "You know horses too well to be just a dude from the city. I can tell that the way you sit a horse. You've sat horses before."

"Most people that come to ranches have," Harris said. He'd be darned if he was going to tell about his past to get out of fighting this crazy cow foreman.

"It's you that's been spreading the news that our rider ain't coming. You also been spreading the news around the Basin that the rider we had coming, we was going to try to push through as having worked for the Bar Q for over thirty days."

"Since you asked," Harris snapped, "that was what I was talking to Dora Jason about last night. I wanted to make sure what kind of folks I was boarding with."

"You ain't boarding with 'em no longer," Andy Donovan said.

A VOICE came from the shrubbery across the drive. Dora Jason said, "Who are you saying can't board here any longer, Andy?"

Andy Donovan looked around and punched up his hat in place of tipping it. "I'm telling this dude spy for Jake Lomax," he said. "He's been here too long already. Where's he been today? And where was he riding yesterday if it wasn't to take what he's learned to Jake Lomax so he can spread it around like it's being spread."

"What news?" the girl asked.

Andy told her while she stared at Bill Harris in the darkness. "Is that true?" Then, without giving him a chance to answer, she shifted her eyes on Andy. "That's right," she said. "Mr. Harris was asking me about how long Buck Brace had worked here and about the rules."

"Last evening he was asking you?"

"Last evening," she said.

"I was going to beat the devil out of him for it just as you come up," Andy said. He looked at Harris. "I don't reckon Miss Dora would feel that was hospitable in her presence."

"Don't let that stop you from trying," Harris said. "I'm getting sick of being blamed for something on poor evidence." He turned to Dora Jason. "If necessary, I can tell you who the spy is for Jake Lomax, if there is a spy."

"Who?"

"I said I could," Harris snapped. "I didn't say I would. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm clearing out. I'll pack my

bags and ride them back to Bowie Basin tonight and one of you can pick up your horse down in the pound corral tomorrow or later sometime—so I don't get charged with horse stealing, too."

Dora Jason was studying him. She looked away now, looked up at the ranch foreman. "You'd better help him when he gets his bags packed, Andy."

"I can handle the bags." He brushed by Andy and the girl, saying, "Leave that horse there, ground reined if you don't mind, till I come out."

When he came out the horse was there, and Andy and the girl were gone. Bill Harris still burned. He didn't know why the girl had gotten under his skin so. Andy he hadn't minded so much until the girl came into the picture, but the fact that she believed him a spy set little fires smoldering inside him.

He found a room in the little Bowie Basin hotel for the rest of the night; and the next morning, he took the train to Juanita and there he hired a rig to take him to Colonel Deevers' place.

He wondered if the colonel would remember him. Probably not, since there hadn't been any light of recognition on the face of Amos Jason when they had met at the station. Why should there have been? He was no longer a sun bronzed kid. He was a man, grown thin with office work and pale as a soiled sheet. That is, he had been a few days before. He'd been darking up of late, riding in the sun; and without the strain of business and with plenty of time to eat his meals he had begun to fill out again.

The colonel had grown thinner, but he was just as straight and commanding in appearance as Bill Harris remembered him. "So you want to hire some bucking horses to ride so you can practise up for the rodeo Saturday," he said and chuckled. "Well, it's your neck. I'll rent you the horses and the help to saddle them." He jerked his head toward one of his hands. "Tell the boys to corner Blue Angel and saddle him. We'll see right off if this man can ride."

They got Blue Angel in a chute, saddled him in spite of his kicking and squealing, and Bill Harris got on. They opened the gate and out charged the beast. He leaped a good twelve feet, broke with his front legs, doubled, half turned, leaped again and broke. Then he reared back, leaped, seemed to be going straight up and when he came down he lit on all fours, a jarring mass of savage muscle.

Bill Harris rode as he used to, free and swinging. He rode through three wild bucks and then he went off head first, sprawled rolling, and lay still with his arms over his head, listening to the thud of hoofs as Blue Angel bucked out his vengeance.

Two hands picked him up, set him on his feet. Colonel Deevers said, "You did fine, son. Anybody tells you you can't ride, call 'em a liar to their face."

Later in the ranch house, eating dinner that night, the colonel said, "You've got a style of free riding a bronc that's like a man used to break horses for me when I could get him. Name was Chawn Harris. Any relation to you?"

"Father," Bill said, "but I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread it around." He told him how it was. "I'd just as soon win what I win and not be helped by who my dad was. You can say I'm just a Chicago manufacturer who was raised in the West and wanted a taste of the old life again."

"You're entering the rodeo?"

Bill nodded. "I'm entering for the Bar Q if it can be arranged."

The colonel smiled. "I reckon it can," he said. "I'd give a lot to see Jake Lomax get a tuck taken in his cinch." He shook his head. "But there's a tough bunch of riders Jake Lomax has got in the saddle for bronc riding. I don't reckon you'll beat them, not all."

"I'll try," Bill Harris said quietly.

From then until the Saturday of the rodeo, he rode bucking horses until his muscles ached and he could scarcely stand or sit.

On the day of the rodeo Colonel Deev-

ers put Bill Harris in a comfortable chair in his own box and sat with him until it was time for the bucking contest.

Bill Harris had his place and knew which horse he would ride. He would come out of Chute Four next to last since he had registered so late, and he would be riding Blue Angel.

WHEN the colonel heard that he shook his head. "I gave you Blue Angel that first day when you came to practise up," he said. "I confess I didn't think you could ride and I figured if you could stay on Blue Angel for more than the first buck, you'd be worth bothering with because Blue Angel is the worst horse in the world." Then the colonel frowned and he said, "Excuse me, Bill. I got to look into something."

Bill Harris saw the colonel's dignified figure move over toward the judge's stand where he stood talking earnestly for a while.

Farther down the field, Harris could see the tall figure of Andy Donovan, and beside him was Amos Jason and his niece. The blood pulsed a little faster as Harris saw Dora Jason there standing in the sun with her wide brimmed hat and a crimson scarf about her neck.

Colonel Deevers was coming back. His face was dark. He sat down heavily, lighted a stogy and blew smoke into the air in a stiff, belligerent stream.

"Harris," the colonel said softly, "I've begun to find out what I wanted to know for a long time. Two years ago they used my string of wild horses for the contest here, and I noticed how it was that Jake Lomax's J X riders, some of 'em anyway, got the easiest horses in my string to ride. Now since I see that you, representing the Bar Q spread, are getting the worst horse in my string, I've been nosing around. I've just found out that the man who is supposed to pick the horses for the riders is Jake Lomax's brother-in-law."

Bill Harris sat motionless.

"I'm on the rodeo commission and I help appoint these men," the colonel went on. "Next year I'll see to it that nobody connected with Lomax is appointed on anything. But that won't help you now. You're going to have to ride Blue Angel or quit in this contest."

Through tight lips, Bill Harris said, "I'll ride him."

They watched the calf roping, the steer bulldogging and the bull riding. They watched the first of the saddle bronc riding and saw Andy Donovan put on a sorry show for the Bar Q spread.

Bill Harris got up slowly, painfully out of his seat in the colonel's box. "I'd better be going."

"Good luck, son," the colonel said. He lowered his voice. "Remember that reverse switch that Blue Angel's got."

Harris nodded as he walked away.

Somebody had been driving Blue Angel crazy by poking at him through the pen boards. He was a rearing, squealing, kicking, biting, striking tornado. The boys were trying to quiet him down enough so they could saddle him.

He reared, trying to get over the high sides of the chute. Bill Harris was climbing above him. Every muscle in his body ached. He'd been overdoing his training but it was too late to think of that now.

A voice bellowed over the arena, "Watch Chute Four. Bill Harris riding Blue Angel for the Bar Q ranch."

A girl's voice cried out in surprise not far away from the pen. Bill Harris heard Dora Jason say, "Why Uncle Amos, that's Bill Harris riding for us."

The note of hope in her voice, the quick sight of her he got out of the corner of his eye, were what he needed to bolster his fighting spirit.

He dropped to the back of the demon horse and merely nodded his head as his feet hit the stirrups. No need of using strength to yell. He raked the horse as the gate swung, raked him again as Blue Angel began spinning to the right.

"Watch that reverse switch," Harris kept hearing the colonel say.

When Blue Angel swung the other way, he was ready for the move and was riding free and easy. Then as Blue Angel went into a wild bucking, Harris forgot about his aches and pains in the jarring shocks that sent through his body waves of torture more awful than anything he had ever imagined.

Blue Angel was diving and climbing in a series of mad bucks from which he broke suddenly for sun fishing and a spin and then he bucked again, stopped that, rose high, turned and struck with all the weight on his front legs.

The world was spinning about Bill Harris and it seemed that only instinct and the old teachings of his father when he was a kid were holding him on the devil. Yet somehow he hung and rattled.

He heard the signal for time and something seemed to explode within him. He began yelling and raking the horse with his spurs, and Blue Angel bucked more wildly than ever. Then the pickups came, one on either side, hemming him in. Harris threw over a leg expertly, as he had in the old kid days, and slid to the ground while the horse bucked on alone.

The arena was spinning crazily, there was a singing in his ears, but he felt better than he had since he'd left the Basin country. He had met a challenge of flesh and bone, had shown his skill in riding a clever, savage beast and he was loving it all over again and realizing what he had been missing all of these years.

PEOPLE were slapping him on the back and telling him what a wonderful ride that was. A girl was saying, "Mr. Harris—Bill, how can we ever thank you? You won for us. You won and saved the Bar Q from—"

Over the clamor a voice was shouting an announcement: "The ride you have just witnessed is cancelled by the judges."

By this time Chute Number One had been sprung open and the last contestant had hurtled out on a big roan only to be thrown on the second buck.

Bill Harris stood by the judge's stand looking up. He tried to shout, to ask why he had been disqualified. Amos Jason was rushing around and up the stairs. Others were going up.

Jake Lomax was in the judge's stand. He was a tall, slick man, a little too smug with his smiling face, a little too tricky looking with his white Stetson. He cast a glance at Bill Harris and turned to Amos Jason.

"You didn't think you could get away with this, did you, ringing in a man who hasn't spent the prescribed thirty days on your place?" he asked.

Amos Jason's face went pale. Apparently, in the confusion of the last few minutes, Jason hadn't thought of that part of the requirements. He turned a sickly face toward Bill Harris.

"Lomax, I figure we can get away with it as well as you can get away with having your brother-in-law select the easy horses each year for your men to ride and the tough ones for your competitors," Harris said and was pleased over the confusion that blast produced.

The judge, a white haired, elderly little man with a goatee said, "However, that has nothing to do with the thirty-day regulation, Harris."

Jake Lomax took advantage of the change of subject. "You're right, judge," he said. "Just how does the regulation read on that thirty-day clause?"

The judge raised a printed sheet and read from it. "All contestants in the saddle bronc contest must have at some time lived for at least thirty days on the premises that constitutes the ranch they represent."

Jake Lomax turned on Bill Harris and laughed. "Okay, dude. Where does that put you?"

Harris grinned. "Right up there in the winning money," he said. "You see, my father was Chawn Harris and I was

born on his Bucking M ranch which Jason bought after my father died."

"That's a technicality," Jake Lomax yelled. "You never worked for Amos Jason in your life."

"That's a lie," Amos Jason yelled back, "and my books will prove it." He was ringing Bill Harris' hand. "I thought there was something familiar about your face when it got a little tan on it." Then to the others, he said, "I bought the Bucking M after Chawn Harris died but Bill here and his mother couldn't leave right then so they stayed on after I bought the place and he worked for me for more than two months before they moved east."

JAKE LOMAX was purple with rage. He was threatening the judge, and the judge was yelling, "Don't you threaten me or I'll have you disqualified for good."

Dora Jason was saying how thankful she was for what Bill had done. They were all filing down the steps of the judge's stand.

"This is more fun than I've had since I was a kid," Bill Harris was saying. "I'd like to buy a part interest on a good cattle ranch like the Bar Q and stay right here."

Dora Jason smiled. "I'll certainly use my influence with Uncle Amos."

Andy Donovan came around. "If you don't mind, Harris," he said, "you said you could tell us who was the spy on the Bar Q."

"Oh yes," Bill said. He looked around, nodded down back of one of the pens. "That tall man with the sunburned nose. There he is down there now, trying to get Jake Lomax to pay him off."

They all looked down. Lomax and the man named Turner were arguing hotly. Turner pushed Lomax in the chest and Lomax swung. The pounding of fists sounded heavy in the hot afternoon air.

Andy Donovan chuckled. "Looks like they're both getting paid off, good and proper."

Dora Jason laughed and hugged Bill Harris' arm.

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Rodeo Princess

When Bonnie Lawson was selected as rodeo royalty, she suspected there was a catch in it—for a girl's dreams don't come true that easily!

CHAPTER I

Honors for Bonnie

EXCITEMENT, happiness, and also disbelief, blazed in Bonnie Lawton's blue eyes at the news.

"You want *me* to be a rodeo *princess* at the Arroyo Grande show?" she cried. "Why—why—a girl must be beautiful and very special to be a princess."

"You are very special," Jim Ralston answered. "Also, you are nineteen, blond and beautiful." He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, and his black hair was lightly touched with gray. His success in a region devoted to mining and ranching had attracted attention throughout the West.

When the Arroyo Grande Chamber of Commerce had grown tired of promoting a small rodeo, which attracted only second-rate riders and few visitors, the organization had naturally turned to Jim Ralston.

"Jim," the committee had said, "Ar-

A Novelet by

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

"All right, Bonnie," Buck Jennings cried, "I've got you!"

royo Grande is about the size of Pendleton, Oregon and Ellensburg, Washington, and we think we can develop rodeo shows of equal caliber with the right man at the head of the Association. You're the right man and we've elected you association president, with full power to act."

"Boys! Boys!" Jim had protested. "I'm up to my ears in work and—"

"Now, now, Jim," the committee chairman had interrupted, "you are a great organizer—with a trick of instinctively picking the right man for a job. You pick your men and tell 'em to get results. All you have to do is pick 'em. *They,* not *you,* do the work."

"Sucker that I am," Jim had answered, "I suppose I'll have to accept. But I'm no miracle man. Don't expect success right off the bat."

The committee had departed, confi-

dent the first show would be successful, and Jim had quickly realized men capable of putting across the sort of rodeo he had in mind, didn't grow in the sage brush with jack rabbits. Gradually he found himself taking on the entire responsibility of building the show from the ground up.

His biggest asset, he realized, was a personal friendship with Buck Jennings who had reached motion picture stardom through the rodeo shows. As a kid, on his own, Buck had known lean days. Facing a hard winter, he had hit Jim Ralston for a job. Jim had made a job on his ranch for Buck.

WHEN spring came, Jim had said, "I've watched you, Buck, and you've got the stuff to go far if you handle yourself right. At State college, they have a course for men who want to get more out of a range than the average range is supposed to yield. There, you can get the lowdown on how to develop cattle that'll produce larger steaks and roasts per head. Play the rodeos, save your winnings, study in your spare time, keep your ears open, and when you hear of a small, promising ranch for sale, let me know and I'll back you. That is, if you show me you can handle your dough."

And Buck had answered, "Mr. Ralston, I've a long memory. I won't forget this. If you ever need it, you can have my only shirt and last dollar."

"Careful, son," Jim had warned. "You never can tell, I might take you up on that some time."

Buck had started with the little Arroyo Grande show; he had saved his money and taken the course at State College. He had found the little ranch, and Jim Ralston had lent him part of the down payment. Buck had paid it back from his first motion picture earnings.

A month ago Jim had telephoned Buck at his ranch and said, "The time has come. I need your shirt and you inside it." He had explained what he was trying to do and what Buck's presence would mean to the Arroyo Grande Rodeo.

Buck had answered, "Name the date, and I'll be there with bells. If it'll help, use my name to the limit on the advertising."

"It'll mean big name riders will enter the show, Buck," Jim had said, "and extra thousands will attend."

And because Buck was coming, Jim Ralston had realized more than ever, he could not leave many details to others. He had suggested to Lollie Tremaine, the district's most beautiful girl, that she be queen. Lollie hadn't said no, but she hadn't said yes, either. She had left Jim up in the air. But when she heard Buck Jennings was coming she had nearly broken her neck to accept.

"He's a friend of mine," she had said. "Remember when he was at Mountain View Lodge, recovering from torn muscles, several months ago? We became quite friendly."

"That settles the queen question, then," Jim had said. "Most of the princesses will come from nearby towns. Folks come in droves to see a home town girl in the parades. Good business. You've been around. Got any recommendations?"

Lollie Tremaine had started to shake her head, then a cold, calculating light had come into her beautiful eyes. Jim Ralston had missed the light because he knew little about the moods of the opposite sex. "Why yes, Jim," Lollie had said. "There's a lovely blond girl, Bonnie Lawton, in Worden City. She might prove an exciting addition to the parade." A baffling light filled Lollie's eyes as she added, "A most exciting addition."

"I'll look her over," Jim had answered. "Thanks, Lollie."

And now Jim Ralston had checked and was finding Bonnie very pleasing to the eyes. He guessed she was five feet three or four inches and Nature had been very careful about the curves, putting them in the right places. She had

poise, courage and breeding. And he knew from her face she had tolerance and intelligence. "She's like Buck Jennings," Jim thought. "She appreciates anything that's done for her. A few more people like Bonnie, and I'll forget all the grief that comes to a man promoting a rodeo."

There was about Lollie, Jim concluded, a regal manner. She was the cold, haughty type of blond. Such a queen needed the Bonnie type to give her court warmth and friendliness. Jim wondered whether Lollie sensed this in suggesting Bonnie.

JIM quit mooning over Bonnie, brought forth a pencil and pad and got down to business. "The Association pays for the Western clothes you'll be required to wear," he said. "Now for some details—bust, waist, calf, ankle, weight and so on." When he finished, he said, "Come to Arroyo Grande a week from today for fittings. You'll be expected to make tours with the queen and her court, to nearby communities. All expenses paid, of course. By the way, Buck Jennings is coming."

"Buck Jennings!" she exclaimed. "What have I done to deserve the wonderful things happening to me?"

"You've probably been kind to old people," Jim answered, amused and touched by her radiance, "and never kicked a dog. Did you ever meet Buck?"

"Oh, yes, at Mountain View Lodge," she answered. "Do they come any finer, Mr. Ralston?"

"If they do, I've not met 'em," Ralston answered. "Good-by, Miss Lawton. I hope my luck holds, and the other princesses turn out like you. I was warned, the queen and her court might prove a headache."

Bonnie sat down at her desk. She was like a girl in a trance. There must be a catch in this somewhere, she thought, A girl's dreams simply don't come true, so easily. One day I'm wondering if the great Buck Jennings will ride at the Arroyo Grande Rodeo—if he has time for even a brief appearance, his schedule is so full—and the next day, I not only learn that he'll ride, but that I'm to be a princess." She took herself sternly in hand. "Bonnie, you little fool, hang onto your heart. Remember the thousands of girls who are crazy about Buck, and the hundreds who are practically throwing themselves at him. Remember the beautiful movie actresses always within easy reach of his rope. *And*—what a man he is with a rope!"

In taking this sensible attitude on the entire situation, Bonnie was merely following her severe New England training, which was—never expect something for nothing. And, you must expect some bitterness with the sweet.

Raised in a small town, Bonnie had taken a secretarial course. Normally she would have worked awhile in an office. Eventually she would have married a boy she had known all her life. She would have become a mother who raised her children in the pattern her family had known for generations—honesty; watching the pennies; voting regularly; saving money against a rainy day; and paying taxes without too much complaint.

But an impulse within Bonnie had filled her with a healthy curiosity. She wanted to know what lay beyond the horizon. Her disapproving parents had hoped her engagement to Bill Mosher, a solid, unexciting boy, would "straighten her out." Because she was fond of Bill, and had had no standard of comparison, she had assumed their hum-drum engagement was normal. Then she had seen Buck Jennings in a Western motion picture.

There had been both a call and a challenge in the picture. "It's wonderful here, at home," she had said, "but out on the range there's elbow room. Perhaps it is because I'm one of a large family and was always crowded, but I really hunger for the elbow room they have in the West."

"The pictures show the good side of it, Bonnie," Bill had said. "Out there, it

won't be like that at all. Hot in the summer; blizzards in the winter; worries about feed for the cattle; fights over the range and water holes. Dust and dirt, too."

"There're struggles, cold and heat—everywhere," she had said.

Then she had gone to New York to see the Madison Square Garden show. She had wanted to see for herself whether Buck Jennings was the handsome, rugged, hard-riding cowboy he was reputed to be. When she returned home, radiant and excited over New York in general and the rodeo in particular, her mother had said, "Bonnie, you'd better not carry on this way around Bill Mosher. He isn't one to put up for long with such nonsense." She had sighed. "Men like Bill don't like flighty girls. He can have his choice of a dozen girls in town."

"And it's bad for him," Bonnie had said. "He's something of a stuffed shirt at times."

LATER she had said to Bill, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if I took a few weeks trip in the West and get this restlessness out of my system."

"Suit yourself," he had answered coldly. "If you weren't the flighty type you wouldn't have any such fool ideas in your system."

His attitude had left her depressed and hurt. She could imagine Buck Jennings saying, "Sure, honey, get it out of your system. It's the only thing to do. Then come back to me, and we'll marry . . . with no clouds on the horizon." Or perhaps all men were like Bill Mosher, and didn't realize the importance of generosity at certain times.

Three weeks later Bonnie's pride made her return Bill's ring. Her Western destination was indefinite until she learned Buck Jennings had torn muscles and would be out of commission for several weeks, resting at the Mountain View Lodge a few miles from Worden City. Bonnie's destination became Worden City. At the lodge, she had been thrilled to death to be seated at Buck Jennings' table.

At first Buck had given her quite a rush, then he had gracefully retreated and devoted his time to Lollie Tremaine who seemed very sure of her knowledge of young men. Returning to Worden City, which was Bonnie's idea of a Western town, she had gone to work for Briggs and Company, buyers and shippers of fruit, cattle and sheep. After a few days' trail, Old Man Briggs was convinced Bonnie was the best office girl he had ever hired.

Jim Ralston's visit pleased Briggs. "First time Worden City's had a princess, Bonnie," he said. "Take off all the time you need."

A few days later Bonnie moaned, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" Briggs rushed out of his office, alarmed. "Mr. Briggs! I'm a rodeo princess and I can't ride a horse! A rodeo princess who can't ride a horse! Horrible!"

"Golly Moses," Briggs said inadequately. "And you can't learn to ride these Western horses in a hurry. Not the spirited ones, like the queen and her court ride in rodeos."

Bonnie called Jim Ralston on the long distance telephone. "I can't ride for sour apples," she wailed. "You'll have to get another princess. If I had had my wits about me, I'd have thought of it at the time. By the way, how did you come to hear about me in the first place?"

"Why Lollie Tremaine suggested you," Jim answered.

Bonnie gasped. "Lollie Tremaine?" A great light was beginning to dawn. "She knew that I couldn't ride. I told her so. Of all the mean, underhanded tricks! She knew Buck was coming, and she wanted to make me look ridiculous."

"Hanged if I'm not getting mad," Jim said. "We aren't going to take this lying down. Besides, your duds are about ready for the fitting. Ask Briggs to supply you with a gentle horse. Practise riding. Practise constantly. I'll get a gentle nag for you to ride in the parade.

Nobody will know the difference. There won't be any group riding until the rodeo parade gets going. Maybe some practise stuff, but nothing more. The visits to various communities will be by automobile. Shall we play it out this way? Will you practise riding every day?" His voice was weary, but hopeful.

"Okay," Bonnie answered. "There isn't much time before the first parade, but I'll practise. Back home there was no opportunity to ride, unless you belonged to an expensive riding club."

Bonnie, after the first wave of anger had passed, took a calm view of the situation. She had been in the West several months and the breaks had come her way—meeting Buck; a nice job; warm-hearted people. She had been getting happiness for almost nothing. Now she must buckle down and work for it. Obviously Buck had been interested in her. Lollie had noted the interest, and fearing it might be renewed at the rodeo, had deliberately planned her humiliation through her lack of horsemanship.

When the girls met for fittings, and when they later toured the state, Queen Lollie acted as if Bonnie were her best friend. When the court arrived at Arroyo Grande Hotel, Buck Jennings was registering. For all his smart Hollywood cowboy trappings, there was no mistaking the working cowboy underneath. The broad shoulders, strong wrists, big hands, slim waist, long legs and overall fitness needed no explanation. Lollie rushed over, exclaimed, "Buck! Darling!" and kissed him.

"Hello Queen!" he exclaimed. "You look great. Every inch a queen." She blushed, laughed nervously and some of her poise drained away as she realized she had over-played her hand in hurrying to him instead of waiting, as Bonnie was doing. Then he saw Bonnie and hurried over. "Bonnie! A princess if ever I saw one." He took both of her hands in his and gave her the famed Jennings tender smile.

She supposed there was a certain Hollywood routine that was expected of him, and that he must follow, but she wanted none of it. "It's nice to be remembered, Buck," she said breathlessly. Inwardly she was thinking, "Please, don't give me the worn, 'How could a man forget you?" But he said quietly, "Some people a man doesn't forget."

She wanted to believe him, but if she had really interested him more than as a passing acquaintance met at a resort, it would seem that he would have tried to communicate with her. No, she couldn't quite believe him. Nor did she hold anything against him. A man in his position had to be careful. He was expected to say the usual things. Some people always lurked nearby, seeking signs of swell-headedness.

He met the other princesses, talked briefly with Lollie, then came back to Bonnie. "I've a free hour, let's go for a ride."

"Horses?" she asked.

"They haven't unloaded Ranger," he answered. "We'll have to use my car."

Bonnie wondered whether he saw the relief in her eyes. It would be bad enough riding in the parade. But to ride at his side on a horse, with everyone's eyes on them, was unthinkable. I c e r t a i n l y won't disgrace him, she thought.

CHAPTER II
Switch in Horses

THE car was expensive, but in good, solid taste. It wasn't rigged up like a circus wagon to catch the eye. They drove out to the arena to size up the outlaw horses brought in for the show. Men converged on Buck and Bonnie was pushed into the background. Strangers slapped him on the back; men who "knew him when" pumped his hand and were happy to be remembered.

Riders who had competed with him in the arena came up, shook hands, grinned and said, "Why don't you stay

in Hollywood and give us common punchers a chance?" And Buck pushed them roughly about and told them to chase themselves. They knew the money he made in the arena—and a lot more—went to help out punchers who had been hurt in other shows. They knew that if he expected to remain one of the nation's top motion picture cowboys, he had to work at it off the motion picture lot. They knew, too, the studio executives sweated blood, fearing he would be hurt. And yet they knew his appearance in newsreel shots was good box-office.

He moved on and watched the unloading of his saddle string. The famed Ranger was first, and the crowd applauded. "Give him a rub down and rest, Joe," he yelled at a puncher. "That horse is tired after a long trip. He's got his work cut out this week." He turned and said, "Bonnie, how'd you like to ride my Miss Nuisance." He pointed to a spirited mare—a beautiful, aristocratic creature that held her head high, and whose eyes were filled with repressed fire.

"I'd love it," Bonnie said. It was the only answer. "But they've assigned me a horse." She didn't tell him it was a meek animal called Deacon. Deacon wouldn't "act up" in the parade.

"If you want Miss Nuisance, I'll fix it," he said. "Let's roll. My string arrived in good shape. The boys will take care of 'em."

They drove over a ribbon of concrete for ten miles. Then he turned into a rutty dirt road running through the sage brush. It followed a winding canyon, and there were pitches requiring low gear work. The wheels kept spinning, and kicking rocks over the brink and she heard them drop into the canyon. They emerged on a bench and presently Buck stopped, with the front wheels on the ragged edge of nothing.

Arroyo Grande was faintly visible in the distant haze. The railroad rails glistened in the sunlight, and there were great squares of green alfalfa and other squares of golden wheat and fields of stubble. There were small orchards and scattered homes. The purple shadows that always came from somewhere as the sun dipped toward the mountains, were filling the deeper draws and canyons. Buck Jennings seemed to have forgotten the girl and his surroundings.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, touched by something fine she had caught in his eyes.

"I'm thinking about a kid," he answered. "He was seventeen. He wore faded overalls, and a rip over the knee was held together with a finishing nail. You know, these nails with almost no head on 'em. He had a ten-dollar horse, a saddle worth five dollars and two bits in his pants. He camped here at sundown, and he looked down below and to him it was the Promised Land. They were starting a little one-horse rodeo. The kid thought he might pick up a little money if he risked his neck."

"And the kid risked his neck?"

"Yes," said Buck. "That wasn't all. He said that if he ever got the things he wanted in life—a ranch, good saddle string, and maybe a car when he wanted to go places in a hurry—he'd come up here around sundown time, and he'd watch night come, and he'd think about the kid."

Buck searched around and he said, "Here's where the kid built a fire. The rocks are still black. His fire blackened 'em, because nobody else would have reason to stop here."

"So the kid built the fire?" she suggested.

"Yes, and it must have looked like a ruby set under the stars," Buck continued. "Because this country sure looks black at night, when you're down below, looking up."

"So the kid built the fire," Bonnie repeated. "Why doesn't the man build a fire?"

"There isn't time," he answered.

"There should be time when the kid, now a man, comes back," she said quietly. "There should be time for things like that. When there isn't, it's wrong,

and the world is in too much of a hurry."

"Some people will be mad," he said.

SHE helped him gather a few sticks. He built the fire and they sat down on a log and watched the sunlight fade from the highest of distant peaks, and felt the crisp air come from forested ridges. There was a scent of the pines, blending with the wholesome odor of sage brush.

After awhile he said, "So you didn't marry that other fellow?"

She looked at him, puzzled, and watched the firelight deepen the shadows and brighten the strong points of his face.

"You were engaged when you were at Mountain View," he said, "and you had taken off the ring because you didn't want folks to know it. There was a little tell-tale ring of white skin on your finger. Somehow, you disappointed me, but it was none of my business, when I stopped to think it over."

"My engagement was broken and the ring returned," she said. "That's why I was at Mountain View Lodge—to help forget a man."

"Someone told me you had left off the ring because you wanted to have some fun," he said. "I'm wondering if there wasn't a reason for giving me a bum steer. I don't know too much about girls. I've never worked hard at understanding them. I like them all. Bonnie—I was falling in love with you, then."

"I wish I had known," she answered. "You see, you were the great Buck Jennings, and the newspaper columnists were always marrying you off to some beautiful actress, and—well, I wasn't going to let myself be hurt. Besides, I wasn't completely over Bill Mosher. And there is such a thing as the rebound—in sheer self-defense, or maybe its pride, but you think you are in love with someone else. But it's the rebound and it leads to trouble. Oh, well!"

"That pestiferous Lollie," he suddenly growled.

"I'm not her favorite princess," Bonnie said. "Nor is she—my favorite queen."

He started to take her into his arms, then hesitated as if sensing the time wasn't ripe. He looked steadily at her, then said, "I wonder if a man can recapture something that was there several months ago? That's a line from one of my pictures, but it's a good one. A writer thought it up and put it into the script, but it's the way I feel. I've lost something or—haven't I?"

"I don't know, Buck," she answered, "I really don't."

He put out the fire and told her, "Let's go." He said little on the drive back to town. "I'm tied up tonight, Bonnie, and the schedule ahead is tight, but I'll manage to see you somehow."

He parked the car in front of the hotel, lifted her to the sidewalk, grinned at the gathering crowd of small boys and followed her into the lobby.

"Storm brewing, Buck," she said over her shoulder, then nodded toward Lollie whose eyes were ice as she looked at Bonnie.

"Buck, where have you been?" Lollie demanded. "We are invited to a dinner and are due there right now. They've been looking for you everywhere."

"Had a little business of my own to squeeze in," he answered. "I'm sorry if I've put anyone out. Give me ten minutes to shift into some other duds."

As he left, Lollie turned on Bonnie. "You've your nerve to take him away from everyone."

"I didn't take him—he took me," Bonnie retorted.

"The queen and her court are supposed to stay together," Lollie declared.

"I can imagine you saying no if Buck had invited you to go for a drive," Bonnie said. "And I've just learned that you told him I was really engaged that time at Mountain View Lodge, but that I had taken off my engagement ring in order to have more fun. You knew I

had broken my engagement. A neat bit of knifing, darling. Darned if I'm not getting madder every minute. A little hair-pulling here in the lobby might liven up things." She took a step forward, just to learn the queen's reaction.

"Don't be an utter fool," Lollie said, and Bonnie almost burst into laughter at the alarm in the queen's face. "And let me remind you *I* recommended you be a princess."

"And *I*," Bonnie answered sweetly, "know the reason behind your action. Now, darling, if you'll excuse me, I'll freshen up."

Jim Ralston, leaning against a nearby wall, shook his head. "It beats anything how two gals, for appearances, will smile while sparring. Well, Lollie asked for it. There isn't a vicious bone in Bonnie's body."

BONNIE slept poorly. There were street noises most of the night, with now and then a six-gun shot as some puncher in high spirits cut loose and punctured the air. She dressed, went down to the dining room and found Buck squaring away to tackle ham, eggs and flapjacks. He grinned, yawned, then stood up and held a chair for her. "Rugged night," he said. "I'm supposed to be in shape for today's show and they keep me up until two o'clock."

"You're a tough cookie and losing a little sleep won't hurt you," she said. "The jolly old queen was in a vile mood when I last saw her. Have you any late report?"

"We were together most of the evening," he answered. "She had moments when she was present only in the flesh. My great grandmother, a covered-wagon gal, called it 'wool-gathering.' I think she was thinking of you."

"And her thoughts were not tender," Bonnie said. "Here comes my coffee. I can go for the ham and eggs, but not the flapjacks."

After breakfast Bonnie got ready for the parade. Lollie was impersonal until she saw the benign Deacon horse. He looked as docile as a church deacon and Lollie exclaimed, "Ye gods! How'd that crowbait get mixed up with the good horses?"

Bonnie wanted to say, "Can't you guess, darling?" But she maintained a discreet silence.

Deacon proved an ideal horse for an inexperienced rider. The shouts of the crowd as the parade moved down Arroyo Grande's main street. The sudden blast of a six-gun; the blare of a cowboy band didn't bother Deacon. But he was a wretched mount when contrasted with the lively horses Lollie and the others were riding. Outwardly Lollie was every inch the queen. She turned on her dazzling smile and she made her horse dance and rear and otherwise look difficult to manage. Bonnie felt relieved when the parade ended. She had not disgraced herself, thanks to Jim Ralston's selection of Deacon.

There was a luncheon attended by persons of importance, a brief rest, then a ride out to the arena for the opening show. Lollie wore the expression of a cat that had swallowed the canary as the mounts were brought forth.

"Here's your horse, Miss Lawton," a cowpuncher said, leading a lively black mare with fire in her eyes.

"Where's Deacon?"

"Deacon hasn't got class enough for a princess to ride," the puncher answered. "You take Betsy, now. She's a horse with pride and ambition. You'll like her."

"Who ordered the change?"

"The queen," the puncher replied.

There was no chance to insist on Deacon now. Either Bonnie must ride Betsy and risk trouble, or quit cold before many eyes. Quitting was unthinkable.

"She's just another horse," Bonnie said grimly. "Just another horse. Four legs, two eyes, two ears—just like Deacon."

"Don't be nervous," the puncher warned. "If you're scared or haven't confidence, a horse knows it. Then the

horse gets scared and nervous."

Bonnie knew that. She tried to remain calm as she mounted Betsy, but her legs were shaking, and she felt a nervous tremor pass through the animal. The program called for mounted cowboys carrying American flags to gallop around the track. Then would come the officials, followed by Buck Jennings on Ranger. Buck and his mount would be ready for work—plain saddle on the horse; Levis, worn boots; flannel shirt and battered hat on the man.

The queen and court followed. Behind them were scores of cowboys and cowgirls; trick and fancy riders; and a couple of hundred Indians from the nearby reservation.

CHAPTER III

The Runaway

AS THE cavalcade reached the back stretch, Lollie prodded her horse. It reared, then broke into a gallop. The other girls followed, and Betsy, thinking a race was on, exploded. Bonnie was almost brushed off as the mare sped past Buck Jennings. The mare lurched, and Bonnie grasped the saddle horn. When Betsy came abreast of Lollie, the queen's whip caught the mare across the eyes. It could have been an accident, but the timing was too perfect. The mare screamed in pain, took the bit in her teeth, leaped the rail and raced across the arena, madly shaking her head.

Bonnie's feet left the stirrups, and she swayed dangerously in the saddle. Only the saddle horn prevented a bad fall. She was taking a pounding from the saddle with each leap. She heard, rather than saw, the crowd get to its feet. She didn't cry out, but maintained a grim, frightened silence. She heard the pounding of hoofs. Then Buck Jennings' arm was around her and he was saying, "Let go! I've got you!"

"Oh, Buck!" she almost sobbed. "I've disgraced *everyone*."

"Leave everything to me," he said. And that was another good line from one of his recent pictures.

He rode straight to the microphone in front of the grandstand. "I'll drop you, Bonnie," he said in a low tone. "Smile and bow!"

She felt her feet touch the ground, then Buck's voice boomed from the loudspeaker. "We weren't trying to scare you, ladies and gentlemen. But I thought you'd like to see a little action from my next picture. Also meet Bonnie Lawton. Bonnie had you fooled, didn't she? She can play the scared girl role better than anyone I've ever seen."

The applause rolled to the surrounding hills and boomed back in a series of echoes. Bonnie was glad a good coating of rouge and powder covered her face, which she knew was deathly white. Her legs supported her only by sheer will power. She smiled, threw kisses and then disappeared through the nearest door.

Under the grandstand, she sat on a box, and caught her breath. Gradually her heart ceased its wild pounding.

If it isn't one thing it's another, she thought. Buck saved my face. He let them think it was a planned stunt. The screen isn't the only place where he thinks fast. But he's put me on the spot. I'm supposed to be an all-around cowgirl and range actress. Where is it all going to end? It goes from bad to worse. Now I've a reputation to live up to or the whole horrible business will come out. Yes, and Buck knows I'm a helpless little ninny.

She walked back to the door and opened it a crack. The Indians were now passing in review. She saw the queen and court on the back stretch passing through a gate that led to the corrals. Overhead she heard the shifting of feet, the mass murmur of human beings gathered to watch exciting contests.

"I can't face them again," Bonnie

said. "I can't! Next time Buck might not be close enough. Nor could it be called a surprise stunt." She looked at Buck, near the chutes, getting ready for the afternoon. "So long, Buck," she said. "So long."

She slipped quietly out of the arena and walked slowly to the hotel. She sneaked into her room, changed her clothing, and went down to the stage depot. She bought several different range newspapers and read the *Help Wanted* advertisements. The Lazy M wanted a woman to do plain cooking. She left the depot and hunted for a cowpuncher who had not been at the arena. She found one brooding on a park bench.

"Where's Lazy M," she asked, "and what is it like?" He told her and it sounded like the answer to her problem. She returned to the hotel, changed her clothes, packed and left a note for Buck with the desk clerk. It read:

Dear Buck:

Don't try to find me. I'm determined to carry out something terribly important to me. You wouldn't approve and would talk me out of it. Thanks, so much, for saving me public humiliation. I'll never forget it.

And, Buck, I've fallen in love with you. There, I'm a brazen wench. A girl isn't supposed to confess what is in her heart until a man has revealed what is in his. Good luck.

I'll watch for your pictures and see them over and over again. I'll see you at Arroyo Grande a year from today. Thank Jim Ralston for everything. With your help, he's made his show big time. Love,

Bonnie.

She caught the stage to Worden City, packed everything, and left a note for her boss, resigning and explaining why she was leaving. Then she took another stage to Marshall City.

•

IT PROVED to be a small community supplying sheep and cattle ranches and small mines. It was an over-night stop for tourists. A stranger in this vast area, she felt oddly inadequate and alone.

I'm going to miss my Worden City friends, she thought. But as soon as I get settled, I'll get along.

In a large general store she learned the Lazy M was in higher country and the air was like wine, the horses spirited. "But you won't stay long," a man said. "There's nothing to hold a pretty girl at Lazy M."

"I'm sure I'll find what I'm looking for," she answered.

Joe Marshall, sixty, and son of the man who had given the town and ranch its name, met her in an ancient touring car that looked as if it had carried calves, grain, branding irons and barbed wire. It had.

The ranchhouse, in a setting of trees, commanded a view of hundreds of square miles of rangeland. The cowpunchers were old and battered; the horses tough and mean; and the cattle half-wild. But the buildings were kept in repair; the fences tight; and the roads and trails in good shape.

Mrs. Marshall did most of her house work in a wheel-chair, but the cooking was too much for her. "Can't wait on the hired hands, and I'm always getting splattered with grease," she explained.

She was a cheerful woman who was confident she wouldn't "be like this always."

Later she added, "Someone brings in the mail every two weeks, and we get good radio reception. There's scads of Western magazines and books in the store room, too. Funny how folks like to read about the life they live. So I hope you won't get bored and up and quit on us. Too bad there aren't some young fellows."

"I'll manage," Bonnie said.

Kate Marshall kept the battery set radio going most of the time, while on the roof above, a battery charger, operated by the wind, worked frantically to keep the batteries charged. Bonnie listened to *Film Folks*, a weekly gossip broadcast.

She had been at Lazy M a month when she heard an announcer say:

"Buck Jennings is back from a swing through the rodeo circuit—sound in

mind and body to the relief of his studio. He left his heart in Arroyo Grande, so it is said. Those who saw the news reel shots of Queen Lollie will understand."

Another month passed, then the radio announcer reported:

"Rodeo Queen Lollie has been visiting Buck Jennings on the lot. She is breathtaking, but is she durable? A girl must be durable if she expects to maintain the pace Buck sets for himself. His boundless energy is something exhausting just to watch."

Several times Bonnie missed the *Film Folks* broadcast, but she was tuned in the night her name came over the air. "It now develops the sensational episode at the Arroyo Grande show, in which Buck Jennings rescued Bonnie Lawton, a princess, and passed it off as a stunt from a coming picture, was very much on the level. The little lady was really frightened and in danger. She didn't know how to ride. Imagine! A rodeo princess who couldn't ride. But leave it to big-hearted Buck to cover it up."

"Well it's out," Bonnie groaned. "And I knew it would get out sooner or later, but I never dreamed it would come over the radio with millions listening. I just thought Arroyo Grande would hear of it. Oh—well! A girl can't have things go the way she wants them to in this world, and she shouldn't expect it. Just keep pitching."

There were six weeks of winter, with snow on the ground, and howling winds, then a "Chinook" or warm wind came and the snow went off within two days, and the radios reported floods in the lower country. Marshall went to town for the mail and was gone five days because of slides on the road. He was full of news. "Bill Jennings' latest picture, *Rodeo Princess*, is at the Gem Theatre down in Warm Springs. We're going."

THE picture was thrilling. It was a story about a little girl from "back East" who couldn't ride, and who found herself a rodeo princess. She would have been publicly humiliated, but the hero saved her from injury and passed it off as a stunt. Lollie had a small part, but even Hollywood cameramen couldn't put warmth into her cold beautiful face. The best shots were of Lollie gazing fondly at Buck, but even then there was little warmth and lots of calculation.

"So that's the girl who done you dirt and wants your Buck," Kate Marshall said. "Well, if Buck has as much sense as I think he has, you shouldn't worry. Still, men can be utter chumps where a pretty face is concerned. According to the information on the screen, Buck was author of the screen play. And—the princess, not the queen, hooked him."

"What I liked better than the lovin' and kissin'," Marshall said, "was the cattle on Buck's ranch. By golly them critters sure run heavy to meat."

"Buck's all wool and a yard wide," Kate Marshall said, "well worth a girl riskin' her neck for. And that's what you're doin', Bonnie Lawton. At first I wondered if you had good sense in that pretty head, but now that I've seen Buck —well, I wouldn't trade my man for him, but if I was a young filly, I'd risk breakin' a few bones."

They returned home the next day and when Bonnie again left Lazy M, fall was close, the fields were golden and she was on her way to Arroyo Grande.

She stepped quietly into Jim Ralston's office and filled out a blank. "Bonnie!" he exclaimed. "Now what are you up to? You want to rope steers, ride buckers and enter the cowgirl's race?"

She nodded. "Mr. Ralston, you knew what really happened last year. I couldn't ride. Buck covered up for me, but it got out and now thousands of people know the truth. I've been taking a few lessons and practicing on . . . the Lazy M."

"The Lazy M?" His brows lifted and he whistled softly. "Anybody know about this?"

"Only a few ancient punchers on the Lazy M and you," she answered.

"*Hmm!* Competition is going to be tougher this year," Ralston said. "Buck's presence last year made the show. We took in the money and this year can make the prizes worth while. There's a silver mounted saddle, of course, for the best all-around cowboy. And for the best all-around cowgirl a—silver mounted saddle. Sure you won't get hurt?"

"Mr. Ralston," Bonnie answered. "You know that in rodeo no one can be sure they won't be hurt. By the way, who's queen."

"You know her," Ralston said grimly. "Personally I didn't want Lollie again. Not after the trick she played on you in switching horses. But Buck insisted she be queen."

"He did?" Something Bonnie had held to the last year; something that had taken her over many difficult hurdles, drained from the girl leaving her weak and listless. "I don't understand it."

"Neither do I." Ralston gazed at her a long time. "As I've told you, I'm a bachelor, and I don't know much about women, but I do know plenty about human beings. I've had my ups and downs. Okay, you've carried out a plan, because you're in love with Buck. Suppose he's in love with Lollie? Suppose he's *that* crazy? Well, if you are as big a girl as I think you are—and as you should be —then you won't let Buck affect you one way or another."

"Let's find out," Bonnie answered. "One thing, I want Betsy for the parade."

Ralston grinned. "That can be managed," he answered. "You wouldn't want to be a princess again?"

Bonnie smiled. "No, this time I'm just a cowgirl. I don't aspire to the ermine and royal purple. I'm just a cowgirl, riding for Lazy M."

That evening, on a borrowed horse, she rode out to the arena. It was deserted. The stands seemed to yawn at her, but memory filled them and the roar of the crowd was in her ears. She saw the parade forming and again there was the rodeo princess who couldn't ride, mounting Betsy. Again there was the sudden pounding of hoofs as Lollie spurred her mount into a dead run. Again there was the cruel slash of whip across Betsy's eye, and the pain-lashed mare's crazy stampede. Again there was Buck's strong arm and his voice telling the crowd it was all a carefully planned act —a scene from his next picture.

"And the scene was in the picture," Bonnie said. "I wonder what Lollie thought of that part of it?"

CHAPTER IV
Rodeo Risks

BONNIE was sitting in the lobby when Buck checked in. She felt her pulse race and was conscious of a warm glow as he stalked to the desk to register. She waited for him to see her.

"Bonnie!" he exclaimed. As she stood up, he swept her into his arms and kissed her. "How are you?" he gustily demanded. He seemed younger, stronger and to possess more energy than last year. "You've changed."

"For the better, I hope," she said.

"I didn't think, last year, there could be any *better*," he said. "And that's no line from a picture, either. But I like you."

Lollie rushed to them. "Buck! I heard you were due. And, Bonnie, darling, you are looking wonderful. So tanned. But oh—you've lost your lovely complexion." She kissed Bonnie who somehow managed not to cringe. "Are you here to see the show, darling?"

"She's a performer," Buck growled, "and I don't like it. We're going to talk over that tonight at supper, Bonnie."

"I'll be all ears," Bonnie promised.

Later, when the meal was finished he growled, "I don't care how good anyone is, they can get hurt, even killed, in this game. Give me one good excuse for going into it. Just *one* excuse."

"You'd laugh it off, being a man," she answered. "I had a long time to think this over. I weighed every angle, then made my decision."

"I'm not worried over the first day," he said. "But the last day, when the chips are down is when you're liable to be hurt."

"Don't worry, I'll not take any chances," she promised.

"Blah!" he exploded. "If you've got nerve enough to enter an arena, you'll take chances." He looked across the room. "There's Ace Cameron—last year's runner-up, and out to beat me this year. He's a nice guy."

"Ace" came over and they shook hands. Ace was a rugged blond man with blue eyes. Except in the arena, he was always relaxed. And now he looked as if he might fall asleep any moment. But he didn't deceive Buck. They talked briefly, wished each other good luck and then Buck said: "I'm trying to talk Bonnie out of riding, but it's no good."

"The only way you can make 'em obey is to get 'em to promise it at the wedding ceremony," Ace said. "And that doesn't always work."

Ace grinned and hurried off.

"I've a notion to marry you right now," Buck growled.

"I'd make 'em leave obey out of the ceremony," she answered.

As Buck predicted, the first day was easy. Bonnie survived the second day without trouble while Lollie watched from the Queen's box, and couldn't believe her eyes.

"Coming out of Number Two Chute, Buck Jennings," the announcer said. "This is the final day, ladies and gentlemen, when the men are separated from the boys. Buck Jennings on Cactus Patch."

Cactus Patch, a wild black, came out fighting. No one knew just how it happened, but Buck was suddenly on the ground, while the horse was trying to buck off the empty saddle. He grinned and walked away. The stands were silent with amazement, except several hundred from Ace Cameron's home town.

Buck had been slow on his roping and bulldogging, though he had won the cowboy race. If Ace made a good ride on Keno, he won. And Ace rode beautifully.

Lollie came over to Bonnie's seat. "You *would* ride," she said coldly. "Buck worried—wasn't able to do his best—and he's lost first place. He had his mind on you, Bonnie. Cactus Patch never saw the day he could dump Buck Jennings."

"What are you trying to do, Lollie?" Bonnie answered. "Unnerve me so I'll be bucked off?" Bonnie left the queen and walked slowly around to the chutes. Marcie Gill was coming out on Tattle-Tale and she made a good ride.

BONNIE looked down on a black mare with a mean eye, then she looked across the arena to the box occupied by the Marshalls and the ancient punchers from Lazy M. Kate Marshall, in her wheel-chair, waved. Nearby Buck Jennings was perched on a fence, reminding Bonnie of a sick buzzard, he was that worried.

"Bonnie Lawton, coming out on Black Satin," the announcer said. "This could be a silver-mounted saddle for Bonnie."

Bonnie crossed her fingers. "Counting chickens before they're hatched," she muttered. "He'll hex me yet."

Black Satin exploded all over the place and Bonnie narrowly escaped pulling leather. A hard jolt set stars dancing before her eyes, then she heard Buck bellow, "Ride her cowgirl! Rake her. Bonnie! Rake her!"

Bonnie's boots began raking the mare, then a gun sounded and a strong-armed puncher lifted her from the saddle while Black Satin finished her bucking alone.

Buck met her. "Do you have to go in the cowgirl race?" he demanded. "Haven't you won enough points to put you on top?" He acted like a fussy old hen with one chick.

"I can't back out," she said. "I'm entered."

"Well, I can't watch it," he said. "See you later. It's the last event, thank heavens."

Bonnie's mare, Two-Step, was the only Lazy M entry. The Marshalls had brought her down in a trailer. There were three Indian girls on good horses, besides six white girls from the different ranches.

There was some difficulty in getting the nine entries off to a fair start. A Box G girl blocked Bonnie, while her sister Box G took the lead.

So that's the way you play, Bonnie thought. She held back until there was an opening, then she gave Two-Step her head. She was eating the dust of six horses now. One of the Indian girls took the lead. They rode with utter recklessness. On the back stretch, the Indian girl's horse stumbled and the girl rolled over the track like a ball. Marcie Gill's horse stumbled over the girl, and she went headlong. A moment later Bonnie was into it.

She felt Two-Step go down, and then she was soaring through the air. She struck the track, and rolled over. She opened her eyes and saw a hoof coming into her face. She jerked her head, then something struck her side and there was blackness.

FAR AWAY she heard, "I *knew* something like this would happen! I knew it!" It sounded like Buck's voice, but Bonnie wasn't sure. "Somebody get a sky-pilot."

"Is she dying?"

"Shucks, no! I want to marry her and, by Jinks, the *obey* is going into the ceremony. Somebody get a preacher." She knew it was Buck's voice now. She was conscious of a swaying motion, and the roar of the crowd. She opened her eyes. Two men were running the stretcher toward an ambulance.

"I'm—a mess," she said weakly, "dirt from head to foot." Then she closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she was in a nice clean bed.

Kate Marshall, in her wheel-chair, was beside her. "It's like this, Buck," Kate was saying. "You wouldn't want a wife without pride. Bonnie has her pride. When Lollie switched horses on her, the idea was publicly to humiliate Bonnie. And but for you it would have succeeded. Don't you see, Bonnie had to acquit herself in her own eyes. There was only one way, in the arena. So she came to us, and the old punchers at the ranch taught her everything they knew. She practised until she was perfect.

"And there was another reason, Buck," Kate continued. "You are tearing full of energy. It's the talk of the picture studios and rodeos. You wouldn't want a wife you had to wait for. If you took a notion to ride lickety-split, you wouldn't want your wife eating dust. You'd want her at your side. Bonnie knew that. There was only one course, Buck, and she took it."

"She could have at least let me know what she was up to?"

"And have you putting your foot down, as you tried to do at this rodeo?" Kate asked.

Bonnie decided it was a good time to open her eyes. Buck had his mother-hen expression, which could have been funny on a big man, but wasn't under the circumstances. He dropped to his knees.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine except for a throbbing head and an aching side," Bonnie answered.

"A hoof just missed your face. The doctor said you banged your head when the horse spilled you," Buck said. "A hoof slid into your ribs, but they aren't broken." He fished into his pocket and brought out a plush box. "I've loved you for a year. How soon can we be married? I don't give a hang if Mrs. Marshall and the nurse do hear me. I'll announce it over a nation-wide hook-up if they'll let me. I love you. That is, if a girl who won an all-around cowgirl championship will marry a man who got bucked off." He grinned.

"I thought I'd lost, because of the spill."

"The next high-point girl tumbled, too, so you're champion," he said. "Now hold out your finger."

She held out her finger and he fumbled in putting the ring on, just as he did in the movies. "As soon as you feel like setting the wedding date, I'll rearrange my schedule for the wedding and honeymoon. You'll want to be married in your home-town church."

"Of course," she answered. "And there's just enough ham actor in me to enjoy the sensation your arrival and the wedding will cause." Bill Mosher would be speechless. Her little brothers would be pop-eyed at having Buck Jennings in the family.

She sighed happily and Buck started to take her into his arms, then remembered her battered ribs. "I'd like to hug the daylights out of you at a time like this," he said. "That sneak Lollie and her dirty tricks!"

"Perhaps we owe Lollie something," Bonnie gently suggested. "She made her play and lost. And she opened my eyes to the sort of girl I must be, if I hoped to make you happy."

"You two can be generous," Kate said with spirit. "You have so much. Nurse, please give my chair a push into the hall, and come along with me. There're times when two's a couple and four's a mighty big crowd."

Star of My Heart

Rodeo girl, rodeo girl,
My little riding queen—
I've hitched my wagon to a star,
And you're the star I mean!

Rodeo girl, rodeo girl,
I'm tired of roaming free—
You'll find I'm not too hard to tame,
Come, toss your loop at me!

TEX MUMFORD

Chuck Wagons WILD

Beaver's fist came up and McChesney reeled back

by CLIFF WALTERS

IF Slim Weaver had guessed what might happen at the Circle A spread that bright April morning, he would have been the first cowpuncher to hit his saddle and make himself scarce right after breakfast. Instead, he spent just a little more time than was necessary at the blacksmith shop in gathering up tools needed to tighten sagging barbed wires on the drift fence between Trapper Canyon and Dry Fork.

The young puncher, tall, quiet, dark-haired, could see Laura Webb loping her buckskin pony up the road. He knew that this slender girl with the deep blue eyes, the light brown hair and lips that

Slim Weaver Rides for Romance and Honor!

liked to smile, would soon be ringing the bell of the ranch schoolhouse. And, before that bell rang, Slim intended to ask Laura to go to the dance in Cross Trail with him tomorrow night.

But Fate interfered with Slim's romantic plans. Just as Laura came within speaking distance, a four-horse team came bolting around the corner of the blacksmith shop. Their driver, a husky young redhead, had lost control of things. The lead team, a pair of tall young grays, swerved sharply off to the right. The front wheels of the wagon cramped, grated harshly against the iron plate at the bottom edge of the wagon box. But the wagon didn't upset.

Slim forgot about Laura Webb. He made a leap to the saddle of his waiting horse. He spurred alongside the gray lead team. He crowded them against a corral fence, and forced them to a halt.

"Good for you, Slim," shouted Laura. And Slim, holding fast to the bridle of a rearing gray horse, experienced a warmth not bestowed by the sunshine of this April morning.

"Get off that wagon, Hugh!" rumbled the loud voice of stocky old Mac McChesney, owner of the outfit. "I don't want you to get your neck broke. You're the only son I've got."

"These half-broke knotheads," answered young Hugh McChesney. "Yeah! Theyre some of Slim's breakin'. Him and Hobble Harper's."

"That's it, Hughie," bellowed old Hobble Harper, clumping out of the big barn which he had been cleaning. "Blame somebody else because you got drug around like a bobcat that couldn't let go of a bull's tail. Blame Slim and me because we break horses without breakin' their spirit. You should have used your head, and those four lines, instead of your whip."

"Shut up, you windy old has-been," young Hugh snapped wrathfully. "You, Weaver! Let go of that gray's bridle. I'm goin' to have these four diggers broke to work before I get back from Cross Trail with a load of rock salt. Yeah, and I mean a load!"

THE older McChesney moved closer and looked up at his son on the seat.

"Get off that wagon, Hugh," commanded his stern-jawed father. "You take Slim's horse and ride up to the drift fence, and fix it. Slim can drive to town, if he's man enough to handle them four horses, and get the load of salt."

"You're danged right Slim's man enough to handle 'em," put in old Hobble Harper, giving the end of his gray moustache an impatient jerk. "He can handle horses, whether he's settin' on 'em or yankin' the leather ribbons over their backs! Go on, Slim. Get up on that wagon."

Slim was a bit confused. He appreciated Hobble's confidence. But he didn't exactly relish young Hugh McChesney's hostility. After all, Hugh was the boss' son.

Five minutes later Slim was driving the four-horse outfit toward town.

"Be careful, cowboy!" called Laura from the door of the little schoolhouse. "And call for our mail, will you? Leave it with Dad when you come back by Meadow Valley."

"Sure will!" Slim yelled, having all he could do to handle four excited horses that had just gotten the best of one driver.

The big wagon creaked. The fractious lead team pranced along, unwilling to settle down, as Slim drove farther and farther away from the ranch where he had worked for the past three years. Slim had saved his wages during those years. Maybe some day he would draw what he had coming from prosperous old Mac McChesney and make a down payment on a little outfit of his own. He would sell, for whatever he could get for it, the worthless old place his freighter father, old Brass Weaver, had left him over on Flapjack Flats—level but barren acres. If things went well, *maybe* Laura might be interested.

Brass Weaver? Slim always thought

of his lank, ne'er-do-well father whenever he drove a four-horse team. Brass, whose nickname had derived from the brass knobs atop the hames on the old harnesses he used, had hauled many tons of freight for many miles during those years when Slim had been growing up. And Slim, starting when he was a small lad, had driven along behind his father, for mile after mile, in the dust and heat of summer, in the stinging wind and cold-creaking snows of winter.

Brass Weaver had come to an abrupt end. There had been too much celebrating at a little town called Stoneville when cowmen had trailed their beef herds down there for shipment on fall. Rival outfits had had horse races and a chuck wagon race on the big, sodded flat to the north of town. Brass Weaver had entered his four wiry horses in the wagon race. But one of his hard-running leaders had stepped in a prairie dog hole. Horses and wagon had cracked up in one splintering heap. And their driver had been killed.

The four horses Slim drove today were settling down and traveling more quietly. Slim was driving down the cedar-crowded road winding over a ridge when the gray lead team emitted a whistling snort. A second later they had jackknifed around. The big wagon tilted dangerously on the side hill. Then, as hoofs thudded and harness leather popped, the wagon tipped over.

Catapulted into a scrub cedar that crackled under the impact of his weight, Slim fought desperately to hang onto the lines. He was jerked against another cedar. And it felt as if his arms were being yanked from their sockets. Then he lost his grip on leather, the horses kicked free of a skidding, overturned wagon—and thundered away toward the Circle A ranch.

His hands and face bleeding from the rake of scraggly cedar branches, Slim looked ruefully at the wrecked wagon. Then, limping painfully, he staggered down the road, picking up pieces of broken harness as he went.

It seemed like a long half-mile back to the ranch. Laura Webb and her gaping pupils, sons and daughters of ranch hands, were standing near the big barn when Slim limped up.

"Oh, Slim!" Laura said. "I'm so—so thankful it wasn't worse!"

"It's bad enough for him as it is," growled old Mac McChesney, his heavy brows knitted. "Four horses all skinned up—and a wagon wrecked, no doubt!"

"Wrecked, yeah," Slim answered humbly. "Somebody come ridin' through the cedars up there and scared them."

"That's your hard luck—not mine!" McChesney snapped. "You wanted to show off—prove how much more of a skinner *you* are than Hugh. Well, now you can pay for that wagon!"

"Don't you do it, Slim!" rumbled old Hobble Harper. "You ain't the first hand who has smashed up a wagon durin' the fifteen years I've been workin' here. None of them were asked to pay for damages. Yeah, maybe because none of 'em had near as much wages comin' as you've got!"

"You're fired, Mr. Harper," said Mac McChesney, voice chill. "You're not much help around here any more."

Slim said, "You're sure jumpin' at a chance, McChesney, to knock old Hobble off the payroll, after all the work he's done for you."

"That penny-squeezer ain't firin' me!" Hobble growled. "I quit—which I should have done years ago."

"You're both quittin'," the cattleman snapped. "Shall I take what you owe me out of your wages, Weaver? I'll sell that wrecked wagon and those four spoiled horses to you cheap. Those horses are spoiled now, and because you weren't man enough to skin 'em like you thought."

"Suit yourself," Slim answered, his jaw tightening. "So you won't lay awake nights broodin' over your loss, you take what you think you ought to have."

"We'll make it a couple hundred," McChesney replied. "And I'm sure Hugh won't break down and bawl when he

hears you and Harper have pulled stakes. He's been after me to fire you both!"

SLIM and Hobble moved over to the old shack of Slim's pa on Flapjack Flat, ten miles from the Circle A. After supper that evening they sat on the door stoop and watched six head of horses grazing in the little pasture. Four of those horses were the runaways that Slim had acquired today. The fifth was his roan saddle horse. The sixth was Hobble's old bay pony.

"That wagon ain't smashed up so awful bad," Hobble said. "We could skid it down here and fix it up. I used to do quite a little blacksmithin'."

"We'll figure things out, pard," said Slim. "In the meantime, don't worry. I've got a little cash left over, thanks to Mr. McChesney's generosity. And there's the big rodeo comin' up at Cross Trail the first of June. I'll win us some money down there if I have to rope, ride, wrestle—or put on another runaway for the folks."

"Don't mention the run-away," Hobble groaned. "After that calamity avalanchin' down on us today, and mostly because my mouth was workin' faster than my head, I'd be scared to drive a team of nightmares across a feather bed. Them danged gray horses! Big enough to work, but fast enough to race. Well, it's sort of peaceful here. Sort of nice not to have old Mac growlin' and findin' fault. Or havin' to watch young Hugh struttin' around in front of Laura Webb. Still, she likes him better than I do or she wouldn't've promised to go to that dance with him tomorrow night. Which I heard her do."

"Yeah?" Slim answered casually.

"Yep," Hobble replied. "Of course, Hugh's goin' to fall heir to the Circle A. And a schoolma'am can add two and two. And Laura and her dad, old Sorrel Webb, are kind of hard up. And still tryin' to lift the mortgage on their little one-horse ranch over there in Meadow Valley. Yes, sir, I wouldn't be surprised if Laura and young Hugh—Slim, what are you lookin' so jut-jawed about?"

"Let's turn in," the younger man said bluntly, and rose.

"Easy, feller," Hobble answered. "I've been guessin' how you felt about Laura. Now I know. But you'd better be speakin' up, Slim."

"Speakin' how?" Slim replied grimly. "Invitin' Laura to move out here on this wind-swept flat—and share this beautiful shack with me? Forget it, Hobble."

With Hobble's assistance, Slim skidded the wrecked wagon from Cedar Ridge down to Flapjack Flats and started the job of repairing. He had to buy two wheels, a front bolster, a tongue and repair the splintered wagon box. It was a slow job. Then came another task—taking the kinks out of four high-lifed horses that were now determined to run away every time they were hitched up.

At first, Slim drove the black wheelers and let them circle on a dead run all over the expansive flat with him. Then the still fleeter grays were given the same opportunity. Slim, aboard the dust-raising wagon, didn't try to curb the running horses. He merely guided them and let them go to it.

"By golly!" old Hobbie blurted one day after Slim had circled the puffing, winded grays alongside the old corral. "If them big blacks were as fast as the grays—Say! Maybe you've got a chance to grab the biggest prize offered at the Cross Trail rodeo—the chuck wagon race!"

"Funny," Slim said, grinning. "I've been dreamin' about the same thing. That's the big event there, with about a dozen chuck wagons competing. I'm goin' to dog-gentle the black team, Hobble. Then I'm goin' over to Meadow Valley and try swapping Laura's father out of his sorrel team, the horses that, with a span of blacks belongin' to the Diamond Y outfit, took second prize in that race last year."

"Golly!" said Hobble, his old eyes shining. "If you *could* swap old Sorrel Webb outa that team, it'd be swell."

"I'd still have to beat about twenty other wagons, includin' the Circle A that

won it last year. Yeah, and with old Mac McChesney himself holdin' the leather ribbons."

"Yeah—Mac and them four matched bays that he saves just to win that two-thousand-dollar first prize," Hobble said ruefully. "But try it, boy. Try it."

Two weeks later Slim led his black team, a gentle, well-broken team now, over to the Webb place, six miles away. It was a Saturday morning. Laura was hanging out the washing when Slim rode up. She turned, smiled, primped at a straying wisp of bright brown hair and called:

"Howdy, stranger!"

"Howdy, Laura," Slim answered. He turned to greet slender, rather handsome old Sorrel Webb who came out of the barn.

"Mighty fine team of blacks you got there, Slim," said Webb. "Are they the runaways?"

"No more they ain't," Slim said. "They're plumb gentle, young, stout. You'll like 'em, Mr. Webb."

"*He'll* like them?" Laura said, surprised. "What do you mean, Slim?"

"I'm goin' to swap him out of his sorrel team, and give him some cash money to boot," Slim answered.

"Oh, no, you're not!" Webb almost shouted. "I bought another sorrel team that's as fast as they are. Yep, and paid two prices for 'em. But I'll get that money back. *I'm* goin' to win that chuck wagon race this year. Laura and I can use the money."

Slim blinked and said nothing. Finally he said, "Here's hoping you do win that race, Mr. Webb. But if you do, you're going to break old Mac McChesney's money-loving heart."

"Let it break," said Laura's father. "We don't owe the McChesney's anything. Oh, of course, Laura and Hugh are mighty close friends. But Laura earns what wages she makes teaching school over at the Circle A."

Slim's spirits were sinking rapidly. He had been harboring a dream that had suddenly begun to disintegrate. The Webbs needed money to pay off the rest of their mortgage. And old Sorrel Webb, always a fancier of sorrel horses, was getting along in years.

Laura said, "Maybe we won't have to beat the Circle A wagon this year, Dad. When Hugh heard about your buying the other team day before yesterday, he said that the Circle A wouldn't be entered in the chuck wagon race at Cross Trail this year."

"He did?" whooped her father exultantly. "Darn! If I didn't have to battle those four bays, I know darned well I could take first money. Still, it doesn't seem quite fair, because Hugh thinks so much of you, Laura. After all, that race is open to everybody, and may the best outfit win."

"That's what I told Hugh," said the girl soberly. "But he knows how much the winning of that purse would mean to us, Dad. However, we'll see. Hugh will probably mention it tonight when he takes me to the dance."

AT HER words Slim's sagging spirits plummeted just a bit lower when Laura mentioned the dance. Slim had been going to ask Laura if she wouldn't go with him. Now he was too late again. And too late to acquire a sorrel team that he had thought about half of last night while old Hobble lay snoring beside him.

Laura was saying, rather sharply, "Why did *you* want to swap for Dad's sorrel team, Slim?"

"Why, I—I thought maybe . . ." He faltered.

"I understand," Laura said. "*You* wanted to enter that chuck wagon race. You wanted to team the sorrels up with those greyhounds that caused you to be fired?"

"Well, perhaps I did."

"Hop to 'er, boy!" yelled old Webb. "I'm not scared of anybody but the Circle A and those four fast-stepping bays. Go out and swap and give boot to pick up a fast team, if you can find one. My sorrels'll show 'em the hind wheels of

my wagon, anyhow."

"Oh, Dad!" said Laura, embarrassed. "Don't be so confident of your horses and your driving. Last year, if old Nick Garrett from Cow Creek had had another team that could have kept up his one span of rambunctious buckskins, maybe you wouldn't have won second money."

"It takes *four* fast horses to win a chuck wagon race," Webb countered. "Yeah, and if Hugh decides the Circle A bays won't be entered, I'll sure win that race."

Just a little irked, Slim said, "Laura's been around the Circle A long enough to know that Hughie boy don't make the decisions there. And, anyhow, a dollar looks as big to the McChesneys as that wash tub."

Stiffening, the blue-eyed girl retorted, "Perhaps you're prejudiced, Mr. Weaver, after your unfortunate experience there. If you hadn't attempted to drive a team that Hugh couldn't handle—"

"We won't argue about it," Slim interrupted. "Well, since I've got a long ride ahead of me, so long. And I hope you enjoy yourself at the dance tonight."

"I'm sure I will," replied the girl firmly.

As Slim returned homeward, he looked from a high ridge down upon the big pasture that belonged to the Circle A. Suddenly the rider halted. A wagon drawn by a four-horse team of perfectly matched bays was emerging from a cottonwood grove down there. The team halted at the edge of the sodded pastureland. Then the driver, old Mac McChesney, cracked a whip. The four bays sprang into action. A chuck wagon raced along.

"Uh-huh!" Slim grunted, and rode on. But he didn't head for Flapjack Flats. He changed his course and headed for Cow Creek off to the west.

Dusk was settling over the hills when Slim returned home that May evening, in a drizzling rain that had begun an hour ago. It wasn't a very inviting place to be coming back to, the rider thought, as his roan horse splashed puddled water aside. The shabby, sagging-roofed old cabin, a ramshackle barn and corral were standing in all their bleak ugliness in the rain.

This land consisted of flat, worthless acres that couldn't be irrigated. Land good for nothing except tumble weeds and rattlesnakes and to race a wagon over.

Slim thought of the Webb place in Meadow Valley, a green, fertile spot with plenty of feed and plenty of water. Then Slim thought of Laura, and how cool her blue eyes had turned when Hugh McChesney had been mentioned. Well, the lights in the dance hall at Cross Trail would be coming on soon. And Laura would be dancing with a redheaded husky who would one day inherit the Circle A and all that outfit's holdings.

The cabin door opened and old Hobble Harper stepped out into the drizzle. He stiffened, peered through the gathering darkness and said, "That's not a sorrel team you're leadin' there, cowboy. Or else this drizzle's faded 'em out till they look like buckskins!"

"They're buckskins, all right," Slim answered. "I swapped the blacks for 'em. Yeah, and paid old Nick Garrett up on Cow Crick too danged much to boot!"

"Huh!" Hobble ejaculated. "Nick's buckskins, eh? Doggone!"

Slim explained why he hadn't been able to get the sorrel team from Laura's father. He added, "But that's enough horse talk for today, Hobble. I'm hungry, tired and soaked full of rain."

"I've got biscuits in the oven," Hobble said. "Hurry up, boy, and let's get to 'em."

WHEN Slim followed the older man into the lamp lighted cabin, he noticed that Hobble's left eye was swollen and discolored. He asked, "What happened, Hobble?"

His companion grinned sheepishly and said, "I found out today that I'm not as young and spry as I used to be. When a

certain visitor dropped in here today with a few drinks under his belt, I told him to keep travelin', and not to leave any more snake tracks than he could help. He didn't seem to like that remark. He hopped off his flashy pinto horse and pasted me."

"Hugh McChesney?" Slim said coldly.

"Who else might leave snake tracks?" Hobble countered.

"He tore into you—old as you are?" Slim persisted.

"Oh, he knocked me down, but I'm not sufferin' any. Forget it, Slim. Huh! Smells like them biscuits is startin' to sunburn. I better get 'em out of that oven!"

Slim's big hands clenched. He wished that he had ridden up here earlier today, about the time Hugh McChesney was knocking old Hobble down. If he had, there would have been a battle. And maybe he would have got the worst of it from the quick heavy redhead. Yes, Hugh would have known that he had been in a fight. . . .

It was the first day of June—bright, clear and with the biggest crowd Cross Trail had ever seen. Banners, strung across the noisy street from one false-fronted building to another, proclaimed that this was rodeo day. Wagons and buckboards lined the bank of Trail Creek down at the camp ground. A band tooted lustily on the vacant lot between the Campfire Saloon and the Cross Trail General Store. Range folk, bent on making a day—and a night—of it, shouted greetings at one another. Kids ran and screamed and scared horses. Spurs jingled and wagons creaked.

As Slim, driving his team of buckskin wheelers and leading the gray team, turned down the slope above town, old Hobble, on the seat beside him, pointed and said, "The old town's overflowin' today. Dust raisin' and revelry! Laughin' ladies, lariats, leather—and liquor!"

"The last bein' what you should guard against most, old-timer," said Slim, smiling.

"Huh!" grunted the older man. "While I'm fool enough to take on a few, I ain't flush enough to tank up. Huh! Listen to that horn-tootin' band!"

"Here's a ten-dollar bill," Slim said, pulling a browned hand from his pocket. "Have a *little* fun, pard. After all, it's been a year since you've had any fun."

"Nope!" Hobble answered. "You haven't won any prize money yet, mister. And if you don't, maybe we'll both be eatin' alkali biscuits."

Slim made his companion accept the donation. The wagon rolled on. Slim detoured around the edge of town and drove along the camp grounds. He and Hobble saw several of the chuck wagons that had been in the race last year. He saw Sorrel Webb and Webb's four fine sorrel horses. Laura was there with her father, but she was talking to Hugh McChesney when Slim drove by. She didn't notice him.

"She's sure pretty, Slim," said Hobble.

"That's what Hugh thinks," replied the young man. "I don't see the Circle A wagon anywhere. I wonder if it's here."

"So do I," Hobble answered. "After all, though, it wouldn't be *too* noble a thing for the McChesneys to do—keep their prize-winnin' bays out of the competition this year, for Laura's sake."

Slim halted his outfit at the far end of the camp ground and said, "While I unhitch and get a little feed into these horses, you go up to the store and buy me a can of beans and a box of crackers, Hobble. Then you can go back and eat at the cafe."

"Me, I just love beans and crackers," Hobble answered. "Especially if I've got a couple bottles of cold beer to float 'em down with."

As the two men ate their lunch, Hobble pointed to the flat expanse of land across Trail Creek and said, "There's the battle ground, boy, that you've been dreamin' about. In a little while from now the lariats'll be singin', the broncs goin' high, wide and handsome—and for the biggest money by far—the chuck wagons'll be gallopin' along."

"That's right," Slim said soberly.

"I'll be prayin' for you, boy—prayers bein' about all I can offer you in return for takin' me in," Hobble said. "You've drilled those two grays and buckskins for all you're worth out there on Flapjack Flats. And, while you'll have to drive for all you're worth today, I hope you'll win."

"I'm not sure that I'll even enter that race," Slim said.

"What?" Hobble gulped. "After all your drillin'? What's the matter? Why're you cavin' in here at the last minute?"

Slim looked away. A moment later Hobble stormed, "I know what's eatin' you, Slim Weaver! You don't want to take first prize money, not when it comes in such sizable hunks, away from the Webbs! Oh, no! *You* can be as noble as the McChesneys, can't you?"

Slim made no reply.

Another moment passed before Hobble growled, "Yeah, you can be a dang sight nobler than the McChesneys. That prize money doesn't mean much to them. But what could it do for you? It could give you a start, that's all! Let you get your hands on a little cow outfit somewhere! For gosh sakes, why are *you* bein' noble? It ain't *you* that Laura Webb's smilin' at, is it?"

Flushing under his tan, Slim retorted, "These four horses are mine. I don't have to race 'em if I don't want to."

"That's right," Hobble agreed. "Would you like to hook up and drive back to Flapjack Flats after lunch, or shall we stay and watch the rodeo?"

"I'd rather stay," Slim replied flatly.

"You think Laura Webb might have one smile left over—for you?" Hobble blurted. Then, immediately, he said, "Sorry, boy. I didn't mean to dig so deep under your hide. It's just that—well, maybe I *will* go uptown and pretend there's something to celebrate about."

Slim entered the bucking contest. But he drew a poor horse, and didn't get in the money. In desperation, he tried the calf roping. But he came out fourth in that event—while Hugh McChesney took first. Slim hadn't been getting enough rope practise lately. He had been too occupied in racing four fleet horses around Flapjack Flat. Racing them around—for what?

THE last event, the big one, was coming up. And before the huge crowd that had been generous with its cheers. Suddenly Hobble was at Slim's side and saying, "The Circle A chuck wagon's just pulled in!"

"What?" Slim asked.

"Old Mac isn't drivin' it, and won't be!" Hobble said excitedly. "A horse fell with him and broke his arm."

"Who's goin' to drive the bays?" Slim asked quickly.

"Hugh! And there he is over there—climbin' up on the wagon and circlin' those fast-steppin' bays around to warm 'em up for the race."

"Come on!" Slim said sharply. "Let's get our horses hitched up." He broke into a run, with his side-kick hobbling after.

A few minutes later twenty wagons were lining up for the biggest event at this cow country rodeo, a rodeo that had grown from those chuck wagon races waged among rival outfits that shipped their cattle from Cross Trail.

Slim, deftly handling his buckskin wheel team and the nervous, gray leaders—grays that had learned much since the day they had smashed up this wagon they now pulled—headed for the starting line.

He drew up in a position alongside Sorrel Webb who called:

"Don't let my dust blind you, Slim. Or don't let the Circle A bays run over you."

"Circle A bays!" called Laura. "Hugh! I thought you said they wouldn't race!"

"I'm not bossin' the Circle A—yet!" he called back to the nervous girl. "Dad takes a lot of pride in winnin' this famous event. Since he's crippled up

and can't drive it himself, I'll have to do it."

"The prince with the shinin' red crown is goin' to pilot the golden chariot!" bellowed Hobble Harper, who was celebrating a little.

"Shut up, you mouthy old coot!" Hugh yelled. "If you don't, I'll shut you up like I did once before."

"You'll lick *me* first!" Slim cut in.

"Gladly!" replied Hugh McChesney. "As soon as this race is over, and those run-away knotheads you spoiled in the breakin' have come in last."

"Stop the rag-chewin'!" thundered the race starter. "Get lined up there, drivers! This old gun is goin' off in a minute. And when it does, you'd better be travelin'—fast—for the b i g g e s t stakes ever put up in Cross Trail."

Lines taut, boots braced hard against the foot board of a wagon he had bought against his will, Slim Weaver was ready. Ready for this moment he had lived a thousand times in the past few weeks.

"Good luck, Dad!" he heard Laura shout. "If you win I'll—"

The girl's voice, fraught with tension, was drowned in the sudden cracking of a gun. Harness leather popped as horses lunged against their collars. And the Circle A bays, the favorites with the crowd, were away a split second before Webb's sorrels and Slim's grays and buckskins.

This was not the silence of Flapjack Flats. Eighty big horses were jarring the earth, and with such force that the world seemed to shake under Slim as it had when he had witnessed his first cattle stampede. Wagons c r e a k e d, wheels rumbled and the wild cheers of the onlookers was a tide rolling over this long, level stretch of ground above which great billows of dust had begun to swirl.

On Slim's left was Sorrel Webb, his fleet horses lining out for all they were worth. On Slim's right were four black horses, powerful but a little too heavy for the task at hand. They fell back—and Hugh McChesney was now the nearest driver on Slim's right. Hugh's bays were overtaking a fast-starting outfit on his right, taking the lead.

Slim's gray leaders and Webb's sorrel lead team were running neck and neck at the half-way mark. But the Circle A bays were out in front and running smoothly past cheering spectators who yelled:

"The bays! It's goin' to be the bays again!"

Grim-jawed, Slim heard those yells. But then his grays forged ahead of Webb's sorrels. The lines in Slim Weaver's strong, steady hands slacked up just a little. And the grays, their ears flattened, their long legs eating up distance, made the buckskins behind them fly with all their speed to keep up the gruelling pace.

Slim's horses were now even with the Circle A wagon. Then his grays were neck and neck with McChesney's wheelers, and creeping up to challenge the bay leaders.

The crowd was going crazy as those grays raced furiously to come even with another team of leaders. Finally, only a hundred yards from the finish line, those grays and earth-hammering buckskins took the lead, and thundered over that finish line several feet ahead of the Circle A wagon.

A few minutes later spectators were crowding around Slim who had hopped off his wagon. But it was old Hobble Harper, eyes moist, who grabbed Slim's hand and nearly pumped it off. Hobble couldn't talk just now, but Hugh McChesney could. The husky r e d h e a d shoved spectators aside, confronted Slim and growled:

"So you said I would have to lick you before I straightened out old Mouthy here, eh?"

Before Slim could reply, a big fist was smashing toward him and raking hide from the side of his face.

Slim's own right came up like a rocket. It smashed to McChesney's mouth. The big redhead rocked back a step, shook his head—and lunged again. This

time Slim hooked a savage left to his face, doubled him over with a wrist-deep jolt to the mid-section—and lanced out again with that rapierlike right.

Knuckles smashed to Hugh McChesney's nose. Again he rocked back. But this time he didn't have time to shake his head. Slim was on him and, while spectators burst into another cheer, was hammering the husky redhead into a sagging heap.

"Knock him cold!" Hobble bellowed eagerly.

Slim ignored that suggestion. He grabbed Hugh by the front of his fancy shirt and growled, "Who was it that sneaked around through the cedars and scared my horses that morning I had the runaway? A runaway that might've broken my neck?"

"I didn't know anybody—scared 'em," mumbled Hugh groggily, and through bleeding lips.

SPARKS of anger glittered in Slim's dark eyes.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Slim cried. "You didn't want Laura Webb and the others to think I could drive a team you couldn't handle. So you tended to a dirty little job before you came riding up to fix the drift fence that morning, didn't you?"

"What are you complainin' about?" Hugh answered, almost whimpering. "If you hadn't had that runaway, the old man—wouldn't've sold you them greyhound racers—and that w a g o n—so danged cheap!"

"Well, since you're to blame for it, don't sound like you're goin' to break down and bawl about Slim's good luck," hooted old Hobble.

A hand touched Slim's arm. He turned and saw Laura. There were tears in the girl's eyes as she said, "Congratulations, Slim! Could I—see you alone for a minute?"

He followed her out of the crowd. She stopped and said, "I want to tell you how glad I am that the most deserving contestant won the chuck wagon race today."

"Most deserving," he echoed.

"I know what happened," she went on. "You wouldn't have raced against Dad if Hugh, after pretending to be too generous to enter the Circle A bays, hadn't stepped in at the last minute—as he had it all planned. Hobble Harper told me about it." Her voice broke as she added, "Thanks for having a big and unselfish heart, Slim Weaver. And for seeing to it that the McChesneys didn't grab first prize again!"

"Would you let me win a *real* prize?" he said. "Would you go to the dance with me tonight?"

"I'd be proud to!" she answered, blinking away the tears. "Proud to be escorted by the new chuck wagon champ. "But, why—why haven't you ever asked me to go to dances with you before?"

"Just kind of slow," he drawled, grinning. "Seemed like Hugh was always a jump ahead of me till today when I caught up with him."

"And passed him," said Laura, smiling.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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POUNDING HOOFS AND HEARTS

A Smashing Novelet of Rodeo Action

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

MY FIFTY YEARS

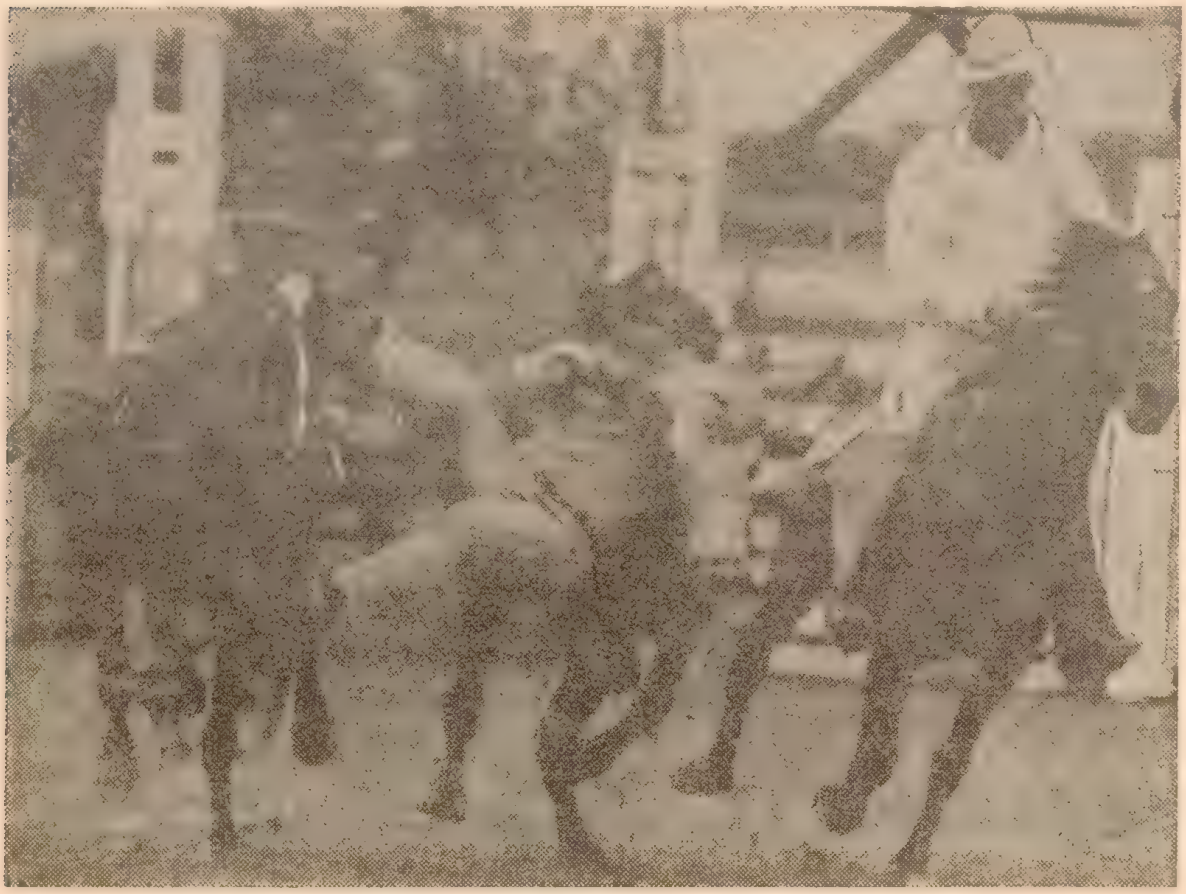
PART XIII

Roundup Time in Texas

ARRIVING home at the close of the season, I found myself with a lot of stock to feed all winter and very little money with which to buy the feed. This was indeed a predicament and called for some study and a quick solution.

There was some good grazing acreage in the cedar brakes of Stephens County about fifty miles south of the ranch and after a little dickering I managed to get a lease on it. Then we set about getting the cattle together into a trail herd to move to the new pasture.

All the regular cowboys with the rodeo had dispersed and gone their separate ways for I could not afford to offer them a winter job as I had done in the past. So I had to depend on the help of a few neighbor boys along with my two



Rube Roberts in action during a bulldogging session

IN RODEO

by Foghorn Clancy

America's top rodeo expert recalls an exciting cattle drive, the birth of a rodeo association, and a strange escapade with gangsters!

own sons, in order to handle the herd.

We got started about ten o'clock one morning, with the cattle and horses making up quite a little herd. We took to the dirt roads so as to miss Fort Worth and the traffic on the main road. By dusk we had driven about twenty miles. Then we were lucky enough to get permission from a farmer to drive the cattle into his lot where we would not have to stand guard over them. We also got permission to sleep in his barn.

This was fun for the new cowboys and some of them began thinking that the life of a range cowboy was just the thing for them. They were to have an opportunity to change their opinion in the next twenty-four hours.

Photo by "Doc," Jamestown, N. Y.

Colonel Jack Mulhall riding herd

Then the Rain Starts

Bright and early the next morning we were off, with only a little trouble in getting the stock moving. We pushed them, however, for the days are short in November and we wanted to make the pastures before dark.

Then came up one of those cold November rains. It hit us late in the afternoon and for the last six miles we drove the stock in a downpour that had all of us soaking wet. The last four miles were driven in the dark.

It was then that the would-be cowboys found out about the seamy side of a puncher's life. It was so dark we could not see, and we just had to trust to our mounts to stay on the road. Even so, the conditions under which we were driving were much better than in the old days, for the old trail drivers had no fenced roads to follow, which automatically kept their herd together. Our herd couldn't scatter out to the sides—all we had to do was to keep them going and see that we didn't pass any in the road. There were ditches on each side that were fairly deep and at times were full of water and these represented enough hazard in the dark to satisfy any of the

gang that hankered for adventure.

We came to the Brazos river after dark and again were thankful that things were a bit modernized. For we didn't have to ford the cattle, which would have been impossible in the dark —there was a bridge. The only danger was that a car might come along while the bridge was full of stock, so I sent one of the boys on ahead to cross the river and hold any autos which might be coming, until we could get across. None came along, however.

We made it to the pasture, finally, and turned the stock in. There was an old abandoned house there where we decided to camp for the night. Shortly afterwards the rain stopped and we built a fire in the yard, cooked a good meal, dried out our clothing and felt mighty happy again in spite of the long, cold, wet drive.

We rolled into our blankets on the floor of the old house. Most of the boys were asleep pronto, in spite of the hardness of the floor, for they were tired from the day long riding. I would have liked to sleep too, but I soon discovered that we were not the only occupants of that abandoned house. A rat convention was being held there that night and the delegates were scampering all over the place, sounding as loud as horses to me. The tumult was not conducive to sound slumber and I envied the boys who snored right through the whole commotion.

Photo by Montgomery Ford

Verne Elliott, owner of the great bucking horse "Midnight"

Next morning the sun was shining brightly and it soon warmed the atmosphere. We all got dressed except one of the boys—Willie Watts, who had worked for me around the chutes during the rodeo season and later became quite a steer rider. Willie had left his wet boots near the camp fire so they would be dry in the morning. They were dry all right. They were baked. They were hard as a rock and had shrunk down so small he couldn't get them on his feet. Willie had to ride back in his socks. That was one laugh we got out of the trip.

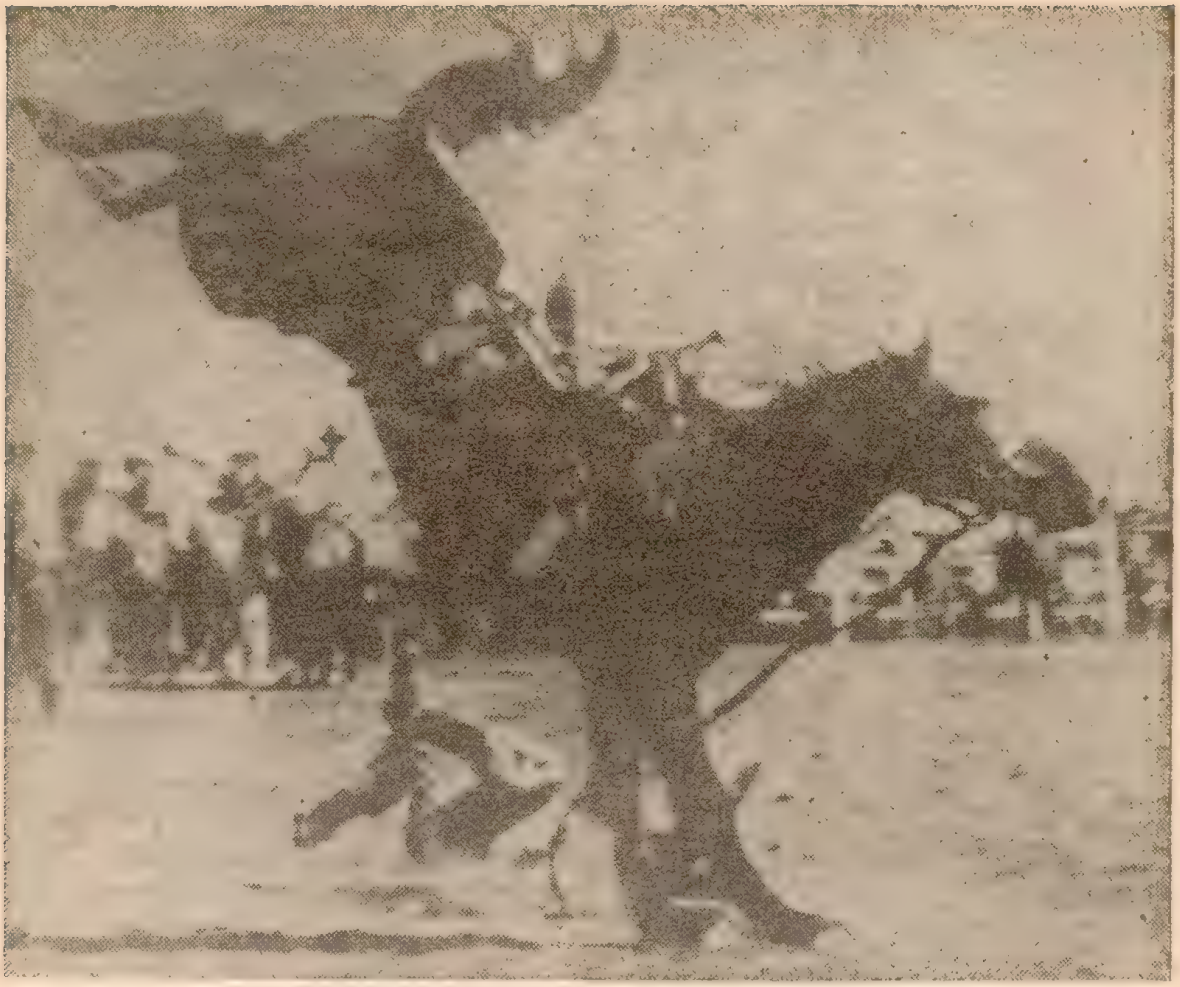
When spring came again I was engaged to announce the rodeo at San Antonio, Texas. It was a very good show and there were a lot of top hands there as it came before the Fort Worth show which ordinarily was one of the first of the season in Texas.

Riders and Ropers Are Hired

Bob Calen, a trick rider and fancy roper who lived in Fort Worth, was engaged as one of the performers at the San Antonio rodeo. Bob was also one of those guitar playing, singing cowboys and one of the first cowboys in Texas to be on the radio.

Bob had a program all winter on WBAP at Fort Worth and there was a bunch of cowboys who were clustered around him at the rodeo to congratulate him and talk about the radio program before the rodeo show started. Deaf Scott, a cowboy artist and great steer rider of the time saw this little crowd and moseyed over to see what was going on. Scott was a good friend of Calen's, but couldn't resist the chance for a crack.

"You know, boys," he said, "there's one advantage of being deaf, you don't



Pete Knight off Midnight, Cheyenne Frontier Days 1932. Knight was a champion bronc rider at this time and Midnight was one of the greatest of bucking horses

have to listen to Calen's singing!"

Reece Lockett of Branham, Texas, was one of the judges at this rodeo. Reese was a great cowboy himself. He went to England with Tex Austin in 1924 and was one of the stars at the big Wembly Stadium Rodeo. He was known as "the cowboy mayor," for he was mayor of Branham for many years.

Reece was one of my best friends and a wonderful fellow, so I took pains to give him a big buildup in my introduction, telling the crowd that he was one of America's best bronc riders and a star of the big London rodeo and so on. Reece dashed out into the arena on the horse allotted to him for the introductions. When he was about midway the horse suddenly bogged his head down between his front legs, caught Reece completely by surprise and bucked him right out of the saddle!

Surprise, however, is a relative term. Reece went out of the saddle, but he never let go of the reins and he was back in the seat again before the horse realized what had happened. This time Reece poured the steel to the bronc and made him buck. The spectators were treated to a first class bronc ride which wasn't on the program.

A week or so after the San Antonio rodeo closed, the annual Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show opened at Fort Worth. As usual, there was a rodeo as its principal feature of enter-

tainment. I was there, but only as a spectator, for I was then on the wrong side of the political fence from the management and was not offered a job. This hurt my pride, not to mention my purse, for I had been connected with this rodeo for many years up to 1924. I had been official announcer, office manager, secretary of the rodeo and rodeo manager. It hurt to sit on the sidelines and watch, without taking part. However, I must admit that with me or without me, it was still a good show.

The Fort Worth rodeo was always a thrilling one and this one was no exception. One of the highlights was the work of Rube Roberts in bulldogging. There was no International Rodeo Association, or Rodeo Cowboys' Association at that time to regulate things. If a contestant was already out of the finals and drew an animal he felt would not give him a chance to make day money on, he could turn the critter out and there was nothing the management could do about it. That year the management made a rule that if a contestant took all his stock as allotted and made an earnest effort, his entrance fees would be returned at the end of the show. In those days the entrance fees were never added to the purse; it was part of the management's take.

Rube Roberts was one of the greatest bulldoggers of all time. He won the bulldogging contest at Tex Austin's rodeo in London in 1924, won the bulldogging at the World's Championship Rodeo in Chicago in 1925 and in Madison Square Garden in 1926. He lived in Fort Worth and was quite a favorite with the rodeo fans of that section of Texas.

Rube Roberts—Bulldogger

Four times straight Rube had won first day money in bulldogging and he looked like a sure thing to win the finals. But the fifth steer he drew was one of those arena-wise, duck-back steers that would stop or duck back just as the dogger made his leap. Twice Rube missed in the leap for this longhorn and received no time. This put him out of the finals.

Rube's sixth and final steer was a tough longhorn which had put the husky Dick Shelton out of the finals. Dick at that time was just coming into the top ranks of bulldoggers and winning himself a big reputation in the event. It had taken Mike Hastings, the old master bulldogger, often called the "Tarzan of Steer Wrestlers," 37 seconds to down this same longhorn. By every rule in vogue, Rube had the right to turn this animal out and refuse to compete upon him.

I don't know whether it was pure love of the sport which made Rube take his turn that day, or whether it was the necessity of saving $75 in entrance fees. Still I do not remember ever having seen Rube Roberts quit or turn an animal out empty. Whatever the reason, when Rube's name was called he was mounted and ready.

The other contestants paid little attention to him. By reason of his bad breaks on the duck-back steer he was already out of the finals and it was considered impossible for him to win day money on the tough critter he had drawn. All the hands expected to see him go out and jump on the steer, tussle with the animal for a few seconds and then allow the beast to go loose.

The steer came out of the chute fast, but Rube's pony was faster. He caught the steer only a few yards from the chute. Rube leaped, caught the horns and clamped hold. To the surprise of all the contest hands, the thousands of spectators—and to Rube, the steer went down as if he had been shot through the heart!

Rube had won another day money prize. But he had done more than that. He had broken the world's bulldogging record, established by Slim Caskey at Miami, Florida! Caskey's time of 4 and 4/5 was shaved by a second and a fifth in Roberts' upset, for a new time of 3 and 3/5 seconds. Everybody was stunned for

a moment or so and then there was a thunder of applause that shook the place.

There were other thrills at this same show. Jim Eskew, who had not yet won his title of Colonel as yet, had just come down to Fort Worth with two great bucking horses — Midnight and Five Minutes To Midnight. They were both big black horses, Midnight being the larger. Eskew sold them to Eddie McCarty and Verne Elliott, who were furnishing the stock and producing the rodeo. Both horses immediately began tossing every cowboy who drew them.

Midnight had belonged to Peter Welch, a Canadian rodeo producer, and had been considered unridable. He tossed the best riders just as easily as the mediocre ones and never took very long over it. Four or five jumps and the rider would bite the dust.

Welch had had financial reverses and was forced to disband his rodeo. The horses were sold by a man who did not know their reputations and consequently their value. Eskew bought them because the price was low enough to make them a good investment for a later re-sale at a profit. He didn't consider keeping them because at that time he had only a little wild west show and the horses were far too tough for his hands to ride.

Midnight, the older of the two horses, became a great feature of the McCarty-Elliott rodeos. He was actually responsible for packing thousands of admissions into the various arenas and his bucking thrilled thousands as he continued to toss the best riders in the game.

World's Champion Bucking Horse

For four years he tossed them all and some of the best bronc riders in the game drew him, but had no more success than the lesser riders. Midnight won the title of World's Championship Bucking Horse. He was awarded a jewel-studded nose-bag as emblem of that championship by another champion—Jack Dempsey.

Four years after making his Fort Worth debut as a bucker, Midnight was back again in the same arena. He had been coming back each March and during all that time no rider had been successful in making a qualified ride on this bucking demon. By now, however, old age was creeping upon Midnight. His feet were going bad. The terrific pounding given them as he leaped high into the air and came down with enough force nearly to jar the teeth from the mouths of his riders had taken their toll of him as well. He was successfully ridden twice during that show and then Verne Elliott, realizing that the great horse was through as a bucker, retired him to the green pastures of his Colorado ranch.

FOGHORN CLANCY

Midnight had been Verne's pride and now that he was old, Verne did not care to see him humiliated and ridden by any and every mediocre rider in the arenas where once he had been king.

In the fall of 1936, Midnight died and was buried on the ranch with plenty of ceremony and sadness because the cowboys admired greatness in a horse as much as in a human. Shortly after the burial the boys made up a fund and bought a monument to go up over the grave of the King of Buckers. With cow-

boy simplicity, they had carved upon it the following verse:

Underneath this sod lies a great bucking hoss,
There never lived a cowboy he couldn't toss.
His name was Midnight; his coat black as coal.
If there's a hoss heaven, please God, rest his soul.

For several years after the retirement of Midnight, Five Minutes To Midnight was the featured bucker of the Elliott string. While he was a great horse, he never quite measured up to the standard of the one and only Midnight.

1929 was an eventful year in rodeo. It was in the early part of the year that the Rodeo Association of America, which had been in the process of formation, was completed and gave the sport its first important organization. The purpose of the Rodeo Association was to create unity of purpose among the producers and to look after the progress of the sport as a whole.

Up to this time the natural jealousies, rivalries and competition among producers and promoters, each of whom wanted his show to be the biggest, created many conflicting dates in sections where one show at a time was all that could prosper.

There were any number of rodeos and many of them were promoted by traveling producers who weren't anxious to pay off if they could help it. The reputation of a promoter, producer or committee was all the assurance a contestant had that he would get the prize money he had won. The R.A.A., therefore, was the first organization to demand that the prize money be guaranteed. It took a firm hold of the rodeo business and headed it in the right direction.

At this time I believe I was still considered the leading rodeo announcer in the country. Still, I now had a lot of stock to care for and I could hardly afford to leave them idle and spend all my time announcing. The result was that I did not announce a lot of shows that year and I did not stage a lot of rodeos. My final show of that season, at a little town named Nixon, Texas, found me so broke that I did not have money enough to feed my stock that winter or to ship them home. Consequently I began to sell them.

The Depression Strikes

The next season, therefore, I did not have any rodeo stock to worry about and could devote myself to announcing and handling publicity for various rodeos. The only worry was to get the engagement.

The depression had struck and it had hit the rodeo business hard. Of course it had hit everything hard, as you remember, if you are old enough to remember those days. I had worked for the County Engineer during the winter on a surveying crew in the field at $85 a month. I used to say to myself, "Imagine Foghorn Clancy, who has made as high as $5,000 in a week at rodeo, working now for $85 a month." The lesson to me was that no matter how high you fly, the bottom is still there and you never know when you're going to hit it.

My first engagement that season was at Oklahoma City during the Fat Stock Show, handling the publicity and rodeo for a promoter from Wewoka named Jack Gladden. Gladden was in the trucking business and had been bitten by the rodeo bug and had secured the contract to produce the rodeo at the stock show.

It was a very good show, but did not make any real money. One visitor at the rodeo was Col. Zack Mulhall, colorful character of the early days of Oklahoma, once livestock agent for the Frisco Railroad. Mulhall was also a rancher, a rodeo and wild west showman and the father of Lucille Mulhall, once America's greatest cowgirl. He had made and spent —or lost—two or three fortunes in his time. Now, with old age fast overtaking him, his health was breaking. I had known him for thirty years or more and had admired his boisterous manner and his terrific energy. But now he was a different fellow, soft-spoken, almost meek.

I picked out a pass which called for a box seat and gave it to Col. Mulhall when he showed up at the rodeo office—even went to meet him at the gate and took him to the box to see that he was placed in the proper seat and could see the whole show. I have always been glad that I did, for it was the last time I saw Zack Mulhall. He did not live long after that.

After the show at Oklahoma City I returned to Fort Worth. It was still early in the spring and George Adams, a rodeo promoter and producer who was wintering near Galesburg, Illinois, engaged me to work with him that season.

I traveled north from Fort Worth with Frank Biron, his wife, Pearl, and their son, Donald, which made it a very pleasant trip. When I got to Galesburg I found that Adams was in the same financial shape I had been—that is, he had lots of stock but no money. This didn't seem to bother him to any great extent. He was a past master at getting credit.

We started out playing "still dates," meaning that we just produced a rodeo in any town we could. They were not in conjunction with a celebration or holiday as often happens. It was just a rodeo, sometimes with a sponsor, most times just on our own, like any traveling show.

They were not contests but exhibitions, or what was commonly called a wild west rodeo. Adams, who was primarily a horse trader anyway, made as much trading horses as he did on the rodeo. And it wasn't much.

It was still a little early for open arena shows in Illinois and our first two stands did not pay expenses. But the cowboys and cowgirls all stayed with the show. Maybe they were like myself—too broke to get away. Anyway, Adams always arranged for them to eat at the restaurants and sleep in small hotels or rooming houses, so they did not suffer any hardships at least.

The second stand was at Princeton, right out in an open field with snow fencing (borrowed) as the arena fence. There were no seats but plenty of parking space next to the arena fence. It was what you might call a "drive-in" rodeo. The stock was good and there were a number of quite good cowboys and cowgirls with the show, so the performances were plenty wild and rough.

Creditors Accept

After all the money had been collected and counted for the three day show, we found it fell far short of being enough to pay off the restaurant and rooming bills. I thought it was the finish but it didn't seem to bother George Adams.

He simply went to the restaurant and rooming house men, told them what a grand bunch of boys and girls he had with the show and how they trusted him to pay them when times got better. He then paid each of those creditors about half of what he owed them and gave them an order on the box office at the next town, which was Gennessee, for the balance of the account. I could tell that the creditors felt they would never get their money, but there wasn't much they could do about it, so they accepted the arrangement with all the grace they could muster under the circumstances.

The next engagement was sponsored by the American Legion. They had built an arena and had the show well advertised. They had plenty of bleacher seats built and it looked good. The weather was also good and the show clicked right from the beginning.

This engagement was for four days, ending on Sunday. By Saturday night the show was in pretty good financial shape. Sunday the place was packed and with the crowd came our creditors. They came into the arena and found George and presented their orders to him.

"Those are on the box office," he said. "I don't carry the money in my pocket. Take them to the box office for payment."

I'm sure the fellows thought there was some catch to it, but there wasn't. George meant just what he had said. They went

to the box office and George's wife, Minnie, who was there, counted out the money in full to them and they left, very happy.

From then on, the show had a pretty good season and soon was playing fair grounds. Most of the time we trailed the stock from one town to another, but where the engagements were further apart, we shipped everything by rail.

Whenever we struck fair grounds, Adams put on his famous chariot races. I think they should be called mystery chariot races as it was a mystery to me how anyone could drive in them and stay alive. The horses were crazy wild broncs and there was never a race without a thrilling wreck.

Some of the hands with that show were Silver Rooker, Jennie Hughes, Lloyd and Lela Schermerhorn, Buddy Mefford, Pete Forrester, Lew Weir, Floyd Schumaker, Vic Perry, Tommy Thomas, Thelma Warner, one of the few cowgirls in the country who acted as pickup in the bronc riding event, Frank Meaney, Pete and Alice Adams and a number of others whose names I can't remember now.

Alice Adams was an excellent bronc rider at that time. She has since retired from the bronc riding event and has been arena secretary at a number of rodeos. Pete Adams was the clown then; for a number of years now he has been an announcer at various rodeos.

We were playing some towns in Wisconsin when California Frank Hafley practically took over our organization. It happened this way. He had the contract to stage the Michigan State Fair Stampede. He engaged me to work on the publicity for the rodeo and to help him handle it and he engaged the whole Adams Rodeo outfit to fill in.

It was a big time affair, regular contests with prize money and plenty of specialty acts. Instead of the chariot races we had chuck wagon races which were copied after the famous chuck wagon races of the Calgary Stampede. They were plenty wild.

We opened on Labor Day. The stampede, which was a very large one, was jammed. There were a couple of harness races scheduled to start the proceedings, but just before time to start there came a short rain. It was enough to make the track very slick and the races were called off. The rodeo went on, however, despite the fact that the slick track made everything twice as dangerous as usual. Ken Insley, one of the contestants in the bronc riding contest, suffered a broken back when his horse slipped and fell on top of him.

Wet Grounds Cause Injuries

Deaf Scott had driven a ramshackle old Ford up from Fort Worth to enter the bareback bronc riding and steer riding. He won himself a broken leg when his bronc fell with him. He was in the hospital all the week of the show, but as there was no rule against substituting then, I arranged a substitute for him in the contests and his winnings came to $300.

At the close of this show, George Adams shipped his stock to Elgin, Illinois, where he was scheduled to go on in about three weeks. I went along to work on the publicity and do the announcing for the show when it did take place.

We had engaged Deaf Scott, before his injury, to help with the publicity by doing water color pictorials on store windows, but this now seemed out of the question.

About a week after we arrived in Elgin, I received a wire from Scott saying that he was out of the hospital, had bought a car with his winnings and wanted me to wire him $10 for gasoline for the trip from Detroit to Elgin.

I wired the money. Two days later I received another wire from him:

70 MILES OUT. NEED MINOR REPAIRS. WIRE TEN MORE.

I sent it and expected him to show up in Elgin within the next day or so. Next day I got a third wire:

WIRE TEN MORE. WILL SELL THE BLAME THING WHEN I GET THERE.

Scott had bought a big old second-hand car that was just about ready for the junk pile. When he finally did get to Elgin he put it in a garage and just left it there until the storage bill ate up what value the car had.

After the Elgin show I headed back to Texas, where I had booked a show at Kaufman. But not having any stock of my own, I had to rent some and while the show was fair, the expenses were heavy and I did not make any money.

It was getting near the rodeo season even in Texas, but I played two more towns, Marlin and Teague, still hoping to make a winning that would help to tide me over the winter. It didn't work, so we disbanded and I went to Houston to handle the publicity and do the announcing for Joe D. Hughes and Frank Y. Dew on a rodeo they were staging at Loma Linda outside of Houston. I worked on that show for a couple of weeks and after it was over, went home to what I called the ranch, near Fort Worth.

I had no stock now, but was still property poor. I owned a place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a town place in Fort Worth and the ranch twelve miles outside the city. So I mortgaged the town place, paid off a note at the bank and had enough cash left to start me living for the winter. Still before the winter was over, I had to borrow on a life insurance policy that I had taken out years before when I was prosperous.

The next year I started out with a lot of hopes. I worked at a few rodeos, wherever I could, and managed to keep the wolf halfway scared away from the door. Later in the season I drifted north again and joined up once more with George Adams. I worked several shows with him, but the salary barely made me a living with just about enough left over to send home to pay the caretaker on the ranch.

Finally, up came what looked like a grand opportunity. Some parties in South Chicago got in touch with me. They wanted a big rodeo at Roby Speedway. They talked like men of money and expense did not seem to bother them.

I spent my last dime going in to have an interview with them. Everything went smoothly and the contract was signed. Being now stony broke, I asked for $250 preliminary expense money and they handed it over without a murmur.

Chance to Clean Up

This was it, I thought. This was my golden opportunity to clean up and get back on my feet financially. I made a deal with George Adams to furnish the stock and equipment on a basis that would leave me several thousand dollars. George continued showing in various towns while I went into Chicago and began to get things ready for the show there.

Roby Speedway was an automobile racing plant on Indianapolis Boulevard in South Chicago. I believe that part of the plant, at least, was in Indiana, for it was right on the Illinois-Indiana line.

My committee seemed to have plenty of money and not be afraid of spending it. A Dr. Goetz of Chicago was supposed to be the financial backer and when I looked into the record of Dr. Goetz and found that he was a wealthy and influential physician, I felt sure my committee was O.K.

Primo Carnera was then in this country and preparing to start training for a fight with Jack Cross in Chicago. I persuaded his manager to open up a training camp at Roby Speedway so we could share the publicity for the coming rodeo. I even bought a gentle longhorn steer at the stockyards so that Primo could have a picture taken bulldogging a steer.

Of course the big boxer did not ride a horse in his bulldogging act. He was too big and could not have made a successful leap from horseback. In fact I don't know if he could have sat upon

a horse in a trot, or if the horse could have trotted with his enormous weight. We simply posed him without a horse.

Well, the fight took place and Primo won. It brought a lot of publicity, of course, and when the rodeo opened we had high hopes. But in spite of everything we had poor crowds and it was apparent from the start that the show was not going to be a moneymaker.

Still, under the terms of my contract I was still bound to make quite a little sum, so I didn't feel as badly as I otherwise might. This complacency was rudely shattered when, towards the end of the show, I was tipped off that most of my committee were gangsters!

George and I fulfilled our contract and when I went to get the balance of the money due us I was told point blank that there would be none paid me.

"And what are you going to do about it?" asked the spokesman, putting his hand on something bulky underneath his coat.

That bulkiness looked to me like a gun in a shoulder holster, so I did the only thing I could do under the circumstances —nothing.

We were really up against it now. I wired a friend and he sent me money enough to get back to Texas. My family and I started out from Chicago in an old Ford touring car without any side curtains.

The weather was cool and the kids wrapped blankets around themselves. Every time a car passed us the occupants would stare and crane their necks.

"Why is everyone staring at us?" my wife asked.

"I guess they think we're displaced cotton pickers," I said gloomily. Or maybe they thought we were Indians.

When we got to Tulsa, I sold the property I owned there and got for it a nearly new Dodge sedan and $800 in cash. Ten years later that place sold for $12,000.

We went on to Fort Worth, some elevated in spirits and spent a happy Christmas, with a whole winter in which to dream of the future and worry about the present. We wondered if the saying about prosperity being just around the corner were true and we waited impatiently for that corner to start turning.

Looking back now, those times do not seem so hard, but memory is sometimes kind and all I know is that the depression is so engraved upon my memory that I will never forget it.

Through all this I never lost faith in the rodeo. I was sure it would come back and I felt that when it did, I would be right with it; that when prosperity came to rodeo it would come to me also. And so I kept right on planning and hoping for the future.

During that winter I read an interesting bit of news in the papers. Two of my gangster friends of the committee had been arrested for kidnaping Dr. Goetz' wife. She had proved a little too smart for them. While she was a captive and waiting for ransom arrangements to be made with her husband, she had "made a date" with one of her guards. After her release, she kept that date—only a few dozen cops kept it with her. When the gangster showed up to meet her, they grabbed him and through him got the rest of the gang.

Well, there was some justice in the world after all, I thought, sadly thinking of the money I could have made on that rodeo.

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NEXT ISSUE

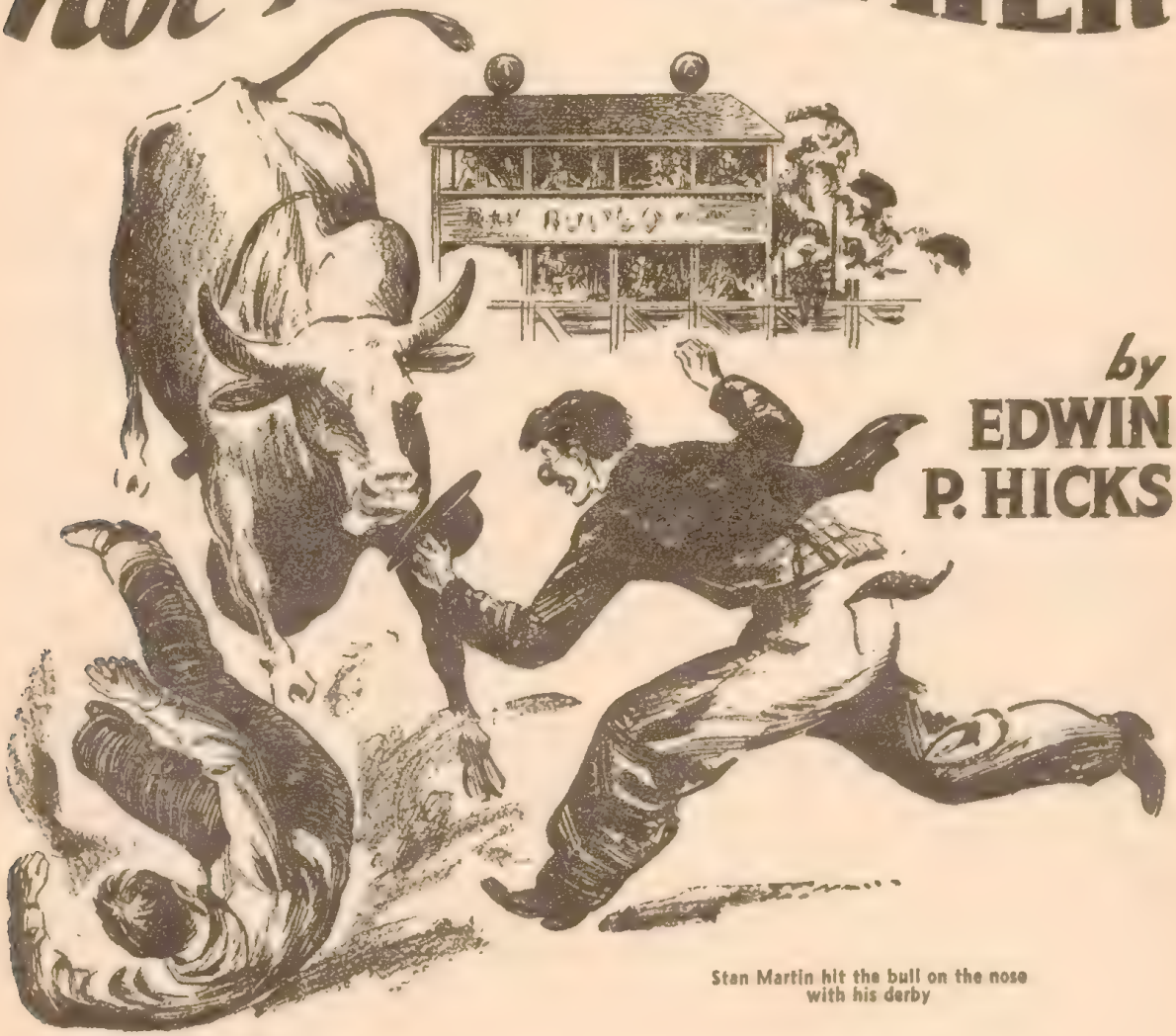
PRESS BOX AND CATCH PEN

More Memories of Fifty Years in Rodeo

By FOGHORN CLANCY

Not for a FATHER

by EDWIN P. HICKS



Stan Martin hit the bull on the nose with his derby

What will ailing little Jimmie Martin think when he discovers his Dad's not a bronc-stomping cowboy—but a grinning clown?

THE hotel lobby already was filling up when Stan Martin went downstairs. Stan chatted with the boys, some of whom had been with him down the line, while others had made rodeos farther west. He smoked a cigarette and grinned at some of the fancy costumes the local greenhorns were wearing. Half of the boys and girls couldn't have ridden a Tennessee walking horse around a baseball diamond without falling off. Their dazzling costumes would have stampeded a herd of blind milk cows. But what the difference, he asked himself. These people get a kick out of playing cowboy once a year. It was this spirit of the West which made rodeos possible and paid his sizeable check at each performance.

A cowboy band began playing "The

Arkansas Traveler." A baldheaded man with a pink shirt showing above a white apron and hand-tooled calfskin boots showing beneath the apron, walked through the crowd banging a triangle and shouting: "Come and get it! Chuck-wagon chow now being served in the dining room."

Stan lost no time pushing into the dining room. His paper plate was heaped up with chicken and dumplings, baked beans and salad, with onions and a hamburger bun balanced on top. Coffee was served in tin cups, and there were home-made cookies with raisins, hot and tempting, on a side table.

Stan sat on a bale of hay and ate heartily. He was hungry. He had a healthy appetite. A girl perched herself on the other end of the bale. "Swell meal," he said, to be polite.

"Yes, it is, Mr. Martin," said the girl.

Stan turned in surprise. "Say, this is a pleasure. The prettiest girl at the dance picks the same bale of hay and knows my name."

She laughed. Stan could hand out a line with any of the boys who lived by the saddle, but he wasn't exaggerating when he said that he had been favored by the prettiest girl at the dance. The young woman who sat beside him was in a gay little cowgirl costume, with fringed skirt of dark material and a blouse of scarlet satin, dark brown cowboy tie, and light-colored sombrero. Her complexion belied her Western get-up, however. Her skin was fresh and flawless, so perfect it was almost fragile, her eyes were a shadowed blue, and her hair was like fine ebony.

"Yes, Mr. Martin, you are quite famous in this neck of the woods. Those gold spurs you are wearing I know you won at Cheyenne. The gold belt buckle you won at Calgary, and the watch and chain at Denver."

MARTIN stopped eating in amazement. "How did you know about that?"

"That isn't all I know. You can ride a bronc that no other man can ride. You can rope any foot of a running horse you want to. You can twirl five lariats at once—one in each hand, one with your mouth, one on a stick with your right foot, and one stuck in your belt behind."

Martin laughed. "Well, up until a couple of years ago I could do all those things anyway. You see, last year I started changing my profession, and I'm a bit rusty on the rope tricks now. I'm a rodeo clown at present—with red nose, straw colored wig, hay-seed hat, trick pants, and padding where I'm most likely to get butted by a bull."

The girl became thoughtful.

"A nickel for your thoughts," said Martin. "See, we are both sitting on a bale of hay in a hotel lobby, the one and only Stan Martin, rodeo clown."

She laughed then. "I'm sorry, Mr. Martin."

"Call me Stan."

"I'm sorry, Stan. You see, I am one of the nurses at the Healing Springs Sanatorium. My name is Amy Hendricks. I know your son very well. In fact, I think I have a crush on Jimmie. He's keeping a scrap book of the pictures and clippings you send him. And I read most of your letters aloud to him. Sometimes at night, even though it's against the rules, I slip in and read your latest letter over for him. He can read, of course—but all the children like to have personal attention. I read the funnies for him, too, every Sunday."

Ike Tackett slapped Martin on the back. "That-a-boy! We're forming a set for the opening square dance. Stan, you and the little lady make swell partners. Come on, Stan, do-se-do!"

The cowboy band swung into the fast music. Martin and Amy Hendricks found themselves in the middle of the set. "Salute your partners!" shouted the caller. Martin bowed to the smiling, black-haired little nurse, and they were whirring through the dance. Amy Hendricks was an excellent square-dancer, nimble-footed as a year-old filly and

twice as graceful. Martin, for all his size, was as agile as a panther, and he loved to square-dance. This looked like a wonderful evening, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Martin hadn't been too happy in recent years.

"Let's go sit somewhere," Amy suggested, after a couple of sets. "I want to talk to you about Jimmie."

They made their way with difficulty through the crowded lobby and to the coffee shop. They ordered drinks.

"Stan," said Amy, "I'm crazy about Jimmie. He appeals to me more than any of the children in the institution—he's so manly and straightforward, and he's been so sick. No—don't become alarmed. He's making steady progress—steady but slow. I can see the improvement in the four months I've been there. But I don't want him to be set back in any way."

"What do you mean?"

"You told me awhile ago that you had become a rodeo clown. Jimmie does not know this."

"He will in the morning. I've been saving it as a surprise. Last year I was just breaking in. I still competed in some of the events and clowned on the side. Now I work with Tackett or Johnnie Lindsay, or Ken Boen—all the big clowns. I'm really funny, if you will let a man brag."

Martin's broad face brimmed over with mirth. "I'm getting a real following. And tomorrow morning I'm going to pull a bushel of funny gags for the kids at the sanatorium. Luke White and I do a whip-popping gag. He gets ready to cut a paper out of a fellow's mouth with a twenty-foot bull-whip, and I'm bending over, twenty feet behind him, minding my own business, you know. He comes over with a back-flip, accidental like, and pops the whip on the seat of my pants. Even the grown-ups get a big laugh out of that. Then he starts to cut a cigarette I'm holding in my mouth with his whip, and I swallow the cigarette. I'll have White with me in the morning. The kids will enjoy it."

"But Stan," said Amy, unsmiling, "Jimmie doesn't know you're a clown. You never sent him any pictures of your clown act. All you sent him were pictures of you riding bucking horses or throwing the lariat or bulldogging."

GRINNING, Stan Martin shook his head emphatically and waved his hand.

"That's right, bulldogging steers. But wait until he sees me in my clown get-up in the morning!"

"That's the very thing I'm afraid of."

"What's the thing you're afraid of?"

"Jimmie has told his little friends that you are the greatest cowboy in the world, that you can ride a horse better than anyone else. He told them you can rope calves and throw lariats and wrestle steers and ride brahma bulls. And here you're going to show up in the morning in a clown costume. I'm afraid he's going to be disappointed. More than that, it will break his heart."

Stan Martin bristled. "Listen, Miss Hendricks. I appreciate you taking an interest in my son. But your interest doesn't approach the love I have for him. Why do you think I became a rodeo clown? I did it to pay Jimmie's expenses at the sanatorium. I wanted him to have the best. You're afraid I'm going to hurt him! Listen. That little fellow is nine years old now. When he was two, I went into service. His mother died three years later—and me fighting Japs in the Pacific. And three years ago, with me still in uniform, that poor little fellow gets it in the arm and the leg with infantile paralysis. That boy is going to have his chance. I can make twice as much money clowning as I can as a rodeo contestant."

Amy Hendricks' features were composed now behind that professional mask that all nurses assume when they choose. "I'm sorry, Mr. Martin. I didn't mean to offend you. It was only that I didn't want Jimmie to be disappointed tomorrow."

"Disappointed! Why should he be

disappointed? A rodeo without a couple of clowns wouldn't be worth seeing. You got to have laughs. Besides that, clowns save lives. There isn't a performance but what some rider would get gored by a Brahma—maybe half a dozen would get gored. But the clowns take them off. They risk their lives. I'm a good clown. Jimmie won't be disappointed. Ike Tackett, Johnnie Lindsay, Ken Boen—they all will tell you I get as many laughs as they do."

Amy smiled. "I grant everything you say. I like clowns myself. I laugh at them. I wouldn't even go to Ringling Brothers Circus if it wasn't for the clowns."

"All people — especially boys — like clowns," snapped Martin.

"Agreed," said Amy. "And all boys like Smiley Burnett, the motion picture Western comedian, and Gabby Hays, and Cannon Ball, and Fuzzy Jones. They laugh at them, and these comedians really make the picture. But the boys go home and who do they impersonate? Why, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and all the Western cowboy stars. But all this is beside the point I was trying to make. Smiley Burnett's son, if he has one, undoubtedly worships him because he knows Smiley is only acting and is a very smart and talented man. And the same goes for Gabby Hays and all of the rest.

"But if you go out there before Jimmie and those hundred other children in the morning as a cowboy clown who gets kicked around, when they have been led to believe you are an outstanding Wild West star, then all I can say is that Jimmie's heart is going to be broken. Good evening, Mr. Martin."

The rest of the Chuckwagon party was spoiled as far as Stan Martin was concerned. He went to his room and proceeded to kick a valise through the shower curtains in the bathroom. He used language reserved in the past only for the stubbornest bronc or the toughest steer. He got out a picture of Jimmie, a picture made a year before just after he had put on his new braces, and swore everlasting allegiance to Jimmie. And he'd be a no-good, cattle-thieving Missouri mule if he'd let any pretty-faced girl in a nurse's uniform tell him how to bring up Jimmie. He'd go as a clown to Healing Springs Sanatorium in the morning and show the kids the time of their lives.

So, next morning, Stan Martin went to see his son as a rodeo hero, dressed in spotless white buckskin and wearing a big sombrero. He also wore the gold spurs he had won at Cheyenne, the golden belt buckle won at Calgary, and the gold watch with golden lariat chain, presented to him at Denver. And Ike Tackett went along in clown costume, with Luke White to do the whip-popping act.

The children, one hundred of them, were arranged, some of them in cots and some of them in wheel-chairs, and some in ordinary chairs, along a long porch. Practically all of them were wearing braces, and some had harness on their arms. And, standing alone, in the very center of the porch, holding with his good right hand to a chair, was Jimmie.

STAN MARTIN lifted Jimmie tenderly in his arms. He wanted to give the boy a bear hug and yell like Tarzan, but he restrained himself. The child was far too frail for rough handling.

"Jimmie boy! You're almost well!" he said.

"Sure, I'm almost well. Can I ride Sandy?"

"You bet you can, son. Sure, you can ride Sandy!" He turned, gave Clown Tackett a kick in the slack of his trick pants, and that worthy turned a flip-flop in the air. "Go get Sandy," Stan commanded. The children screamed with laughter.

Tackett brought Martin's trained roping pony from the car-trailer — only Tackett was riding Sandy backwards, his clown head towards the rear. He slid off over the tail, when Sandy stopped

as Stan Martin seized the bridle.

Martin lifted little Jimmie into the saddle and vaulted up behind. He put Sandy through his various gaits then. Jimmie's little body was rigid with excitement. "Easy, son—easy! Loosen up. Pretend you're part of the horse. One of these days you'll make a better rider than your Dad. Here, you take the reins. No, the left hand, son—the left. You need your right hand free. Might have to shoot a coyote with the right."

Stan Martin had spoken casually, with the utmost unconcern in his voice. But his every sense was alert to the crisis in his son's body. The paralyzed left hand edged forward an inch—another inch!

"Come on, son! Let's show the other kids how a real horseman handles a horse."

Another inch! They had trotted the length of the porch now and were about to turn.

"Come on, boy. When we go back I want you to be handling Sandy."

Jimmie turned his wan little face up at Stan. Beads of perspiration were on his forehead. "I can't, Dad! I can't move it any farther."

Sandy had stopped now. He was standing there waiting for the touch of the reins.

"Son, let's show Miss Hendricks! You like Miss Hendricks, don't you?"

"Dad, she's great!" Jimmie cried. The tenseness had gone out of his arm now. It was out of his whole body. "Look, Dad!"

The thin left hand was holding the reins.

"Whoopee!" yelled Martin. "Then let's go!" Expertly he turned Sandy with his knee, leaving Jimmie in complete control of the reins. They moved then at a gallop clear around the court yard. Stan waved his hat and saluted the bright little band of children on the porch.

Then with Jimmie still in the saddle, Stan whipped out his lariat and suddenly threw the loop around both of Ike Tackett's feet. The clown hit on his hands and turned completely over. About that time Luke White let go with the long bull-whip, and the popper exploded against Tackett's breeches. The clown rose four feet in the air from his hands and knees. The audience on the porch shrieked with joy.

Then, trotting over to the porch, Stan Martin started to dismount and lift off Jimmie, but there was Amy Hendricks, her eyes as blue as Texas prairie flowers, to take him in her arms.

"I held the horse!" cried Jimmie proudly. "I held it with this hand!"

"I saw it—I saw it Jimmie!" cried Amy, and her eyes now were brimming with tears. The boy was holding out his left hand to show her.

Stan Martin went through his rope tricks then. He was rusty, but he could not fail now. He got five lariats to spinning at once. He roped Ike Tackett's donkey first by the left fore-feet, then by the right hind foot. Then he roped both fore-feet, and then both rear ones —then all four. And finally he roped Ike and the donkey together, greatly to Ike's pretended disgust. Then Ike got mad and chased the donkey, and the donkey in turn got mad and chased Ike, with teeth gleaming. Then Ike and the donkey made friends again and went to sleep together—and rolled over together. It was a great show, and the crippled youngsters shouted with glee.

Tackett and White and the others hurried back to town after the show, to take part in the parade. But Stan Martin missed it. The rodeo committee had granted him this time to spend with Jimmie. Jimmie sat on Stan's lap and showed him his scrap-book, after the hospital had resumed its regular routine. Folded within the scrapbook was a picture of Amy Hendricks.

"What is Miss Hendricks like Jimmie?"

"She's wonderful—next to you Dad. Sometimes at night, when I can't sleep, I play she's my mama. Sometimes even when I'm hurting, it can't hurt any more when I play she's my mama."

"Does Miss Hendricks know about

this, son? Did you tell her?"

"No, no. It's my secret. All us kids make up secrets."

Stan Martin had a lump in his throat. He felt like the time when he had smashed his great fist through his barracks locker door in San Francisco, when word came that his son was stricken with infantile paralysis.

WHEN Martin said good-by to Jimmie, there was Miss Hendricks standing by in street clothes. "I'd like a ride in to town with you, if you don't mind a hitch-hiker," she said.

"Awful happy to have you," said Martin.

As they drove through the gate, Amy spoke: "I saw a miracle today, Stan Martin."

"That boy's got what it takes," said Martin.

"It was a miracle, just the same," Amy insisted. "A miracle brought about through the understanding of a good father. You gave Jimmie an incentive to use that hand. It might have been months before he could have used it despite all we could do. Maybe he never would."

"The boy's got will-power," said Stan.

"I just want to say that maybe after all I was wrong last night. I am convinced that you know the child even better than I do."

"Sure, it always takes a man to know what ticks in a boy."

"I'm sorry I opposed you appearing as a clown."

"Well, I'm not," said Stan. "If I'd gone out there as a clown, I wouldn't have taken Jimmie horse-back riding. And if I hadn't taken him riding, he wouldn't have had to reach for the reins with his left hand."

"That makes me feel so much better, Stan."

"Going to the rodeo this afternoon?"

"Not this afternoon, but tomorrow afternoon, maybe."

"Why not? You've got the afternoon off."

"Business, Mr. Martin. Strictly business."

"Well, just as well, because I sure won't be in white buckskin out there in the arena."

"I know," said Amy.

It was a good rodeo, with an excellent afternoon crowd. And the night performance brought a capacity crowd. The rodeo grounds were in the ballpark with temporary chutes and cattle-pens built off back of the third base line. The grandstand held more than seven thousand people, and it was crowded. Bleacher seats built across through center-field and along the right and left field lines increased the attendance to well over 10,000. A good crowd for the small Middle Western town.

The Brahma bulls were especially vicious. Ike Tackett and Stan Martin had their work cut out for them, attracting the attention of the great beasts when they would have gored thrown riders. Three riders, prostrate in the dust, were saved from sharp horns in the afternoon show, and fully a half dozen were in danger of their lives in the night performance.

More than once Stan Martin and Ike Tackett scooted beneath the eight-foot hog-wire temporary fence, which was run across the field to protect the spectators in the bleachers before the Brahma bull riding contest began. Once Tackett actually was butted under the fence. Martin ran over and fanned Ike's pants with his hat and then kicked Ike where he had been fanning. The crowd loved it.

The next day was a busy one. First there was the parade in the morning, with the afternoon show starting at 2 o'clock, and then the evening performance. It was Saturday, and there was a big crowd out for the parade, with the biggest attendance yet at the afternoon show. Even the aisle space was sold. That was good. Big crowds inspired the contestants and the feature performers, and even the animals felt the excitement.

Perhaps it is because the roar of voices

and the baffling composition of colors all about, but broncs are harder to ride, calves harder to wrap up, steers harder to lay down, and bulls meaner, when the crowd is a big one. There were fully 12,500 people present in the little ball park when the rodeo gun sounded and the grand entry began. The faces of the rodeo officials were happy.

There it went—the flashing colors—the national flag and the state flag fluttering in the breeze as Buck Trewhitt and Jess Goodspeed circled the arena and took their stations. Then the serpentine gallop in and out, grapevine fashion, following the leader, until the arena was full of cowboys and cowgirls, trick riders, feature actors, and home talent.

The grand entry in any rodeo is one of the most impressive features. Young and old, even the tiny tots on Shetlands, doffed their hats as they passed the flags. Johnny Lindsay, riding his trick mule, and in clown costume, doffed his straw hat as he passed by the flag, and so did Stan Martin, riding at the end of the line. Stan wore a patched frock coat, a black derby, a straw colored wig that stuck out from under the derby. His nose was red, and painted freckles were on his face.

IN A matter of seconds, the arena cleared, as all riders dashed for the far exit. The rodeo officials were introduced and came galloping in to form a line between the flag bearers, riding beautiful palominos and several of them seated in $2,000 saddles. And here came Johnnie Lindsay riding on his donkey. When the donkey stopped, Lindsay went over his head—and then Stan Martin riding backwards on Sandy. When Sandy stopped, Martin did a backward flip over Sandy's head.

At that moment the loud speaker blared: "Ladies and Gentlemen: In the center section of the grandstand, special seats are being arranged along the bottom aisle for twenty-five children from the Healing Springs Infantile Paralysis Sanatorium. The ushers will try to leave a little space between their chairs and the first row for passage. But please be careful not to jostle these visiting children. Incidentally we have been informed by the grapevine that the tickets for the children were bought by Miss Amy Hendricks, a nurse at the hospital, while transportation was provided by the Chamber of Commerce. What say folks? Let's give Miss Hendricks and the kiddies a hand!"

Stan Martin heard the announcement as he was sitting a-straddle a calf in the center of the arena. A moment later he was being transported by the bucking calf, while he held on to the tail.

Immediately the announcer blared a second time: "We have just learned that one of the children from the hospital is nine-year-old Jimmie Martin, son of that stellar rodeo clown, Stan Martin, who has just been thrown on his ear—on his ear that is—by a calf."

Again the crowd thundered applause. But in Martin's brain now there was a state of confusion. As he went through his tricks with Johnnie Lindsay, he wondered. What did it mean? Amy Hendricks there with twenty-five children from the hospital—and with Jimmie! After she had tried to keep Jimmie from knowing that he was a rodeo clown.

Stan set himself to his work now. He would give the performance of his life. With Lindsay's help he diapered a calf and powdered it—and almost got it on Johnnie by mistake. His long lariat shot out like a snake, and he roped a long-limbed, raw-boned bronc and stood still while yard after yard of loose rope unwound in his hands until the end was reached. Then Martin was flipped six feet into the air like a toy doll attached to the back of a truck.

Martin greeted a limping cowboy sympathetically. Johnnie Lindsay ran and picked up the cowboy's hat. He handed the hat to the rider, and as the youth reached out for it gratefully, Lindsay dropped it. The boy bent over to pick it up, and then Martin kicked him in the seat of the pants and with

great long-legged strides fled towards the grandstand and up the eight-foot wire fence and then half-way up the screen in front of the grandstand.

Perched up there as if in mortal fear of the rider he had wronged, Martin looked down on the row of youngsters from the hospital who were seated in hospital chairs in the aisle back of the box seats. There was Jimmie almost jumping up and down and waving at him. And Amy Hendricks, sitting by Jimmie's side, was waving too.

Martin climbed down then, and he and the clown, Lindsay, got in a quarrel with the man behind the mike of the loud-speaker. They described for the benefit of the crowd just how big a horse they owned. By pantomime they informed the spectators that the horse was so big it could be hitched to the top of the grandstand. "And where would its tail be?" asked the announcer. "Behind the microphone!" they bellowed back at the announcer.

Then Martin turned to find Johnnie Lindsay's donkey sitting on top of Johnie. Stan had a heck of a time getting the donkey off Johnnie and Johnnie on the donkey.

Sugar Brown and his Indian family did their colorful tribal dances, and Lindsay and Martin, heckled by the announcer, crept up on their hands and knees and tried to run off with one of the beautiful Indian girls. But the young braves suddenly turned on the clowns, routed Martin with tomahawks and proceeded to scalp Johnnie Lindsay of his trousers. Johnnie ran in long-handled red flannel underwear and great shame for the nearest exit, while Martin held his middle in pantomime joy at the discomfiture of his fellow clown.

NEXT Luke White did his whip-popping act, popping his pretty wife with a thirty-foot murderous looking bull-whip, what time he wasn't accidentally warming Stan or Johnny's pants.

And when the pretty horsewoman did a Roman standing leap with two Palominos over a low-slung roadster, there were Lindsay and Martin calmly reading a newspaper on the opposite side of the roadster, and the horses cleared them too. They rode out of the arena holding to the rear bumper of the roadster and scooting along through the dust.

Weaver and Juanita Gray and the White Sisters and Billy Clark did their rope tricks, and both clowns imitated them and got hopelessly tangled up.

And then the announcer was warning: "During this last act, please do not leave your seats. Under no circumstances enter the arena. The Brahma bulls are dangerous animals."

A crew of workmen quickly put up the temporary eight-foot fence across right and center fields, from bleacher to bleacher, to protect these spectators, while other workmen tested the fence posts protecting the grandstand and third-base line bleachers, testing each post with sledge-hammers. It wasn't all for show. The Brahma bulls are very dangerous when excited and are capable of killing a man. A stuffed dummy was slid along a wire which ran from the grandstand to the distant bleachers, and the dummy dangled above the pitcher's mound, it's legs only a foot from the ground.

Stillwell Shorty, miniature Oklahoma rodeo contestant and stooge clown for the bullfighting event, took his position on a heavily protected barrel, out near the dummy.

Here came the first bull, with a cowbell clanging and hoofs kicking high in the air, the animal was hitting stiff-legged and twisting at the same time. The boy on his back didn't have a chance. He went off the side and tried to roll free. The bull was on top of him, but Stan Martin's soaring derby hit the enraged animal on the nose and distracted him. The bull took after Martin then, but Martin clearly outran it, again squirrel-climbing the eight-foot fence and on up half-way to the top of the section of grandstand screen.

Martin eased down then and sat on

top of a post and clapped his hands and cheered heartily as Johnnie Lindsay encouraged the bull to butt at the barrel in which Stillwell Shorty's head could be seen. The bull accepted the challenge. Shorty's head disappeared inside the barrel just an instant before the bull hit it. The barrel went one way, and Lindsay went the other, and then the dummy was hurled twenty feet into the air. The bull hooked the dummy again as it came swinging back. These really were vicious bulls.

Martin could see Jimmie still having the time of his life and still waving his hands. He was waving his left hand now almost at well as his right. Gosh what a kid! And Amy Hendricks was waving too—inviting Martin to come over to her!

Martin unwound his long legs, edged around the grandstand screen, and hopped over into a box-seat. He clowned his way over to the section where the kids from the hospital were stationed and took Jimmie into his arms.

"You like me kid, huh? You like your daddy clown?"

Jimmie hugged Stan's neck with *both* arms. "Gosh, Dad! Gosh—you're swell!"

Amy Hendricks was shouting something to him. It was difficult to hear anything over the roar of the crowd.

"I was wrong!" she screamed through cupped hands. "When I saw what you did yesterday, I knew you understood Jimmie better than I did—I knew anything you did would be right—all right with Jimmie."

Stan put his arm around Amy and hugged her and clowned as if he would steal a kiss. Instead of backing off from him, she threw her arms around Stan and kissed him. Everybody laughed and cheered. "You be careful, Stan. Be careful! You hear me?"

Stan Martin went vaulting back then, over the box seats, out over the fence, and into the arena.

NOW there was another bull on the loose. The bull trotted towards Stan who lowered his head and trotted towards the bull. The bull stopped and pawed the ground. Stan got down on hands and knees and pawed the ground. The bull lumbered off and butted at the dummy. It turned then and headed back towards Stan. Stan did a scare-scrow act then. He stood perfectly still, his six feet four inch frame as motionless as a statue—one hand pointing straight out like a sign-post toward the arena exit. The bull looked at him and trotted meekly out the way Martin had pointed.

But the next bull would have gored its rider had not Johnnie Lindsay attracted its attention. It chased Lindsay, and Lindsay went to circling. The great 1,200 pound beast was called Black Death. The name was appropriate. The bull was as black as night and had the heart of a killer. The bull came roaring like an express train towards Stan Martin, who had chosen this very time to do an esthetic dance for Stillwell Shorty's benefit. Stan came out of his dance just in time, and Shorty's head disappeared in the padded barrel. But the bull paid no attention to either of them.

Black Death headed for the grandstand, bellowing and tossing its horns. Goodspeed and Trewhitt spurred their horses and came like the wind with lariats waving, but they were not close enough. The great bull suddenly was up on its hind-legs. It cleared the eight-foot fence. The tremenduous black body crashed through the grandstand screen and hit in the box-seats beyond.

Pandemonium broke out in the grandstand. Women screamed and fainted. The boxes nearest the animal were vacated instantly. The packed crowd of humanity rolled back like waves in the sea.

The bull, stunned momentarily from the impact of the leap, rose to his feet and looked stupidly about. Twenty feet down the aisle were the helpless children from the sanatorium. They were unable to move very quickly. Some of them were only able to walk slowly with

their braces in place. The monster leaped a second time, with amazing agility, over the back of the box and now was in the aisle. Jess Goodspeed's lariat noose slithered over the wire fence and hooked one horn of the bull, but the noose slipped off as Black Death shook his head. Trewhitt's rope cast at the same time became entangled in the wire screen.

With great strides, running faster than he had ever run to escape a bull, Stan Martin reached the eight-foot wire fence an instant after Goodspeed and Trewhitt got there with their horses. Almost by instinct one of Stan Martin's great hands scooped up the only weapon of any kind that he could find—one of the sledge-hammers which an arena roustabout had dropped behind the protective fence. Grasping this hammer, Martin hurtled over the fence and into the row of box seats.

Black Death now was both panic stricken and angry. There isn't a more dangerous beast in the western continent than a Brahma bull when it is both mad and afraid. On top of this, Black Death had a mean heart. He lowered his massive horns and headed down the corridor towards the helpless children. Black Death was a horrible, almost ludicrous figure. In motion he resembled a great, leaping cat, and yet with it all the bull had the awesome power of a ten-ton truck.

Stan Martin bounded from the back of the box seat into the floor of the aisle five feet from the nearest child, as Black Death was upon him. The arena roustabout's sledge-hammer swung in a great downward arc and crashed against the skull of the bull. Every ounce of strength that Martin had in his tremenduous body was behind that swing. Martin felt crunching bone as the hammer bit into the skull of the bull. Then Martin was bowled over and a great wall of blackness was upon him, crushing him.

Martin came to some time later in a hospital bed. Amy Hendricks was there beside him in spotless white nurse's uniform, and Jimmie was sitting in a chair.

"Anybody get hurt?" Stan asked.

"Nobody," said Amy. "Nobody but a rodeo clown, but half of the hospital is full of women recovering from fainting spells, and a couple of men nearly kicked off with heart attacks."

"Aw I wasn't even scared with Daddy there!" Jimmie boasted.

"Shall I tell him something?" asked Stan.

"Tell him what?"

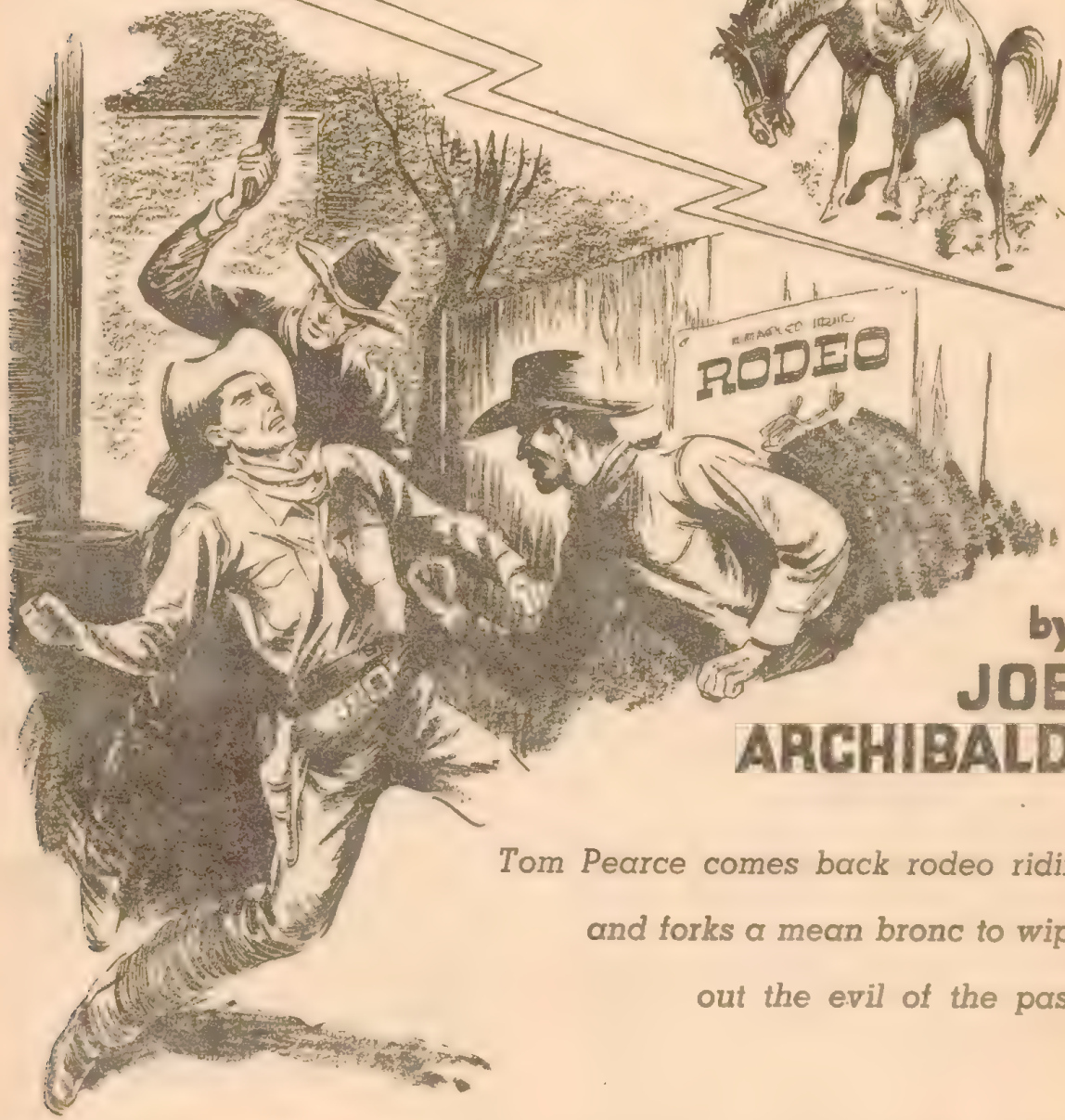
"Tell Jimmie that he doesn't have to pretend any more that you're his mama —that you're going to be a real one at last."

Amy ducked her head, while the color mounted in her beautiful white skin.

"Yes, do," she said.

The dark eyes of a beautiful girl outshine the glittering lure of wealth for a fighting miner in SIXGUNS AND A SENORITA, a fascinating novelet by A. LESLIE featured in the Summer issue of our companion magazine of Western romance—THRILLING RANCH STORIES! Now on sale, 25c per copy at all stands!

Saddled LIGHTNING



by
JOE
ARCHIBALD

Tom Pearce comes back rodeo ridin'
and forks a mean bronc to wipe
out the evil of the past!

MEMORIES that were sweet could not quite compensate for the bad that were in Tom Pearce's mind when, for the first time in almost eight years, he looked down at Frank Sutherland's Swinging-J home ranch.

Nothing seemed to have changed physically. The Battle River twisted down through the valley in wide sweeps. The bluffs curved back from the far side of the ranchhouse in great semi-circles—grassy slopes that led up to a level plateau.

Pearce wondered if he should not let well enough alone. The Sutherlands and certain men who'd been in their pay had put a brand on him when he'd gone away that time, and it was doubtful whether they would see fit to blot it out, even though he had heard back in the town of McCall of Sutherland's dire need for a man who could ride a bucking horse.

Stubbornness was in the set of Pearce's chin and recklessness was bright in his eyes. Finally he nodded emphatically and got his horse moving under him. He came down off the bluff and picked up one of the bridle paths that had been chopped out of the dense growth of cottonwood. A horse and rider came around a sharp bend and he swung to the side to make room, then abruptly hauled in on the reins.

His startled exclamation was involuntary, for during the last six miles he had been wondering how much of a change there would be in this girl.

She was more beautiful than he had imagined, even though her clothes were very little different than any cowpuncher's. The blonde hair he had remembered as being braided and be-ribboned was now the color of wheat when fully ripe, and her eyes, beginning to storm at his direct gaze, were a warm bluish-green. The freckles he had never forgotten still paraded across the bridge of her nose, and now nostalgia and some bitterness stirred deep within him.

Kit Boylan's cheeks flushed. She said angrily as she drew abreast of him, "If you've come here for a job, Mister, I'll see that you're taught some manners! Remember that!"

Tom Pearce said, "You don't remember, Kit?"

The girl twisted in the saddle and looked at him closely, and suddenly her eyes filled with surprise. For a moment Pearce saw some of the old eagerness and warmth, and then the barrier came up and left him cold.

"Tom Pearce!" Kit said breathlessly. "You've changed so much! We've always wondered what had happened to you."

"You knew for a while," Pearce said bluntly. "It wasn't fun, Kit. They called it a work farm but it was a reformatory with a wall around it, and rooms a kid smothered in and that stank of insecticide. Most graduates end up in a bigger jailhouse."

Kit Boylan tried hard to meet his direct glance, but had to take her eyes away when he began talking again.

"I'll say it now like I said it then: that shootin' was an accident! We were out in the shed playin' with the six-gun an' it went off and shot Bob Sutherland in the shoulder. After the scare and the shakin' up, he saw a way t' get rid of me."

"What could I have believed then, Tom?" Kit asked desperately. "All the facts—"

"Facts? Frank Sutherland adopted me—an' Bob, even only fifteen years old, figured some day I'd get a part of the Swinging-J an' he didn't want that. He resented the fact you was nice to me—an' he saw his way an' he took it. He said I tried t' kill him so's I would get the ranch some day—an' you. So they came an' took me away an' labeled me a young badman at fourteen."

There was some resentment lacing the answer she gave him:

"I was only eleven, Tom. I couldn't think as clearly as an adult. My father was—and still is—the foreman and he loved Bob. Everybody said—"

"Sure," Tom Pearce said. "You had t' believe. But do you believe it now?"

"What good would it do if I said I didn't?" Kit asked, her voice breaking. "Why did you come back? You can't change their minds. You can't—"

"I did a lot of readin' the past few years," Pearce said. "The books said that time heals wounds an' men forgive an' forget." He laughed. "I'll admit it's a business proposition, Kit. Frank Sutherland wants a rider who can beat all the others at bronc-ridin' at the Camino Valley Rodeo. I heard about Tex Nieland gettin' his leg busted, an' that there isn't another hombre here capable of beating those other ranch entries, to say nothin' of the contest men."

"You—a bronc-buster?" Kit Boylan asked.

"I've been ridin' the rough string for a long time," Pearce said. "Well, I better find out now as later if a bad hat has to stay one."

He rode on toward the Swinging-J ranch buildings without a backward glance. Kit Boylan changed her plans

for the morning and followed several yards behind him.

ALL THE riders who were not out on the range were grouped near Sutherland's big corral and looking at the bunch of horses there. A little wiry man with a small mustache was sitting on the ground, the dungarees rolled up his left leg as far as the knee. A thin layer of dust hung high above the corral when Tom Pearce rode up to the Swinging-J group and surveyed them closely.

Some of the faces he remembered, but most of them were strange. He knew Bob Sutherland right away. His eyebrows were still a solid black line across his head, and he hadn't gotten over the habit of rubbing his thumb-knuckle across his teeth.

"Well, Flack, you want a try at another bronc?" a solidly built man with swatches of white at his temples, said.

The man on the ground rubbed liniment on an ugly bruise just below the knee. There were traces of dried blood at his nostrils. He swore at Howie Boylan, the foreman, and said:

"You aim to get yourself a bronc-buster but you half kill 'em 'fore they can post an entry fee! If they've got wilder cayuses than those there, I'm quittin' this rodeo business!"

Tom Pearce drew Boylan's gaze a moment later. The ramrod came toward him, the lids of his eyes slowly closing.

He lifted a hand and passed it across his stubbled chin, then quickly dropped it.

"By golly, it's Tom Pearce!" Howie Boylan said, neither angry nor pleased.

"What?" Bob Sutherland hurried up alongside Boylan. A small smile appeared around his thin-lipped mouth. "How are you, Tom?" he asked.

"Never felt better," Pearce said and wished he could be sure of young Sutherland's smile. "Don't smell the fatted calf cookin'."

Boylan groped for appropriate words and could only come up with: "Look good, Tom. What have you been doin'?"

"Fiddle-footin' here an' there, Howie," Pearce said. Then: "You found the Swinging-J entry for the Camino Valley shindig yet? For the bronc-bustin' part of it? Thought if Sutherland wa'n't too particular an' could forget—"

"You?" Bob Sutherland asked quickly. "You mean—"

Boylan said, "Go get your father, Bob."

Tom Pearce got out of the saddle and stretched, looked over at the Swinging-J rodeo horses and then at the little man on the ground. Boylan said:

"Meet Ky Flack, winner at the Battle Hills Stampede about two weeks ago, Tom."

Pearce acknowledged the introduction, and Flack said: "If you've got any brains, friend, you'll change your mind about ridin' these squealin' devils." He got up and gingerly put his weight down on the bad leg. He grimaced and swore once more.

Tom Pearce kept watching the ranch-house. In due time Frank Sutherland, a little bigger around the girth than in the past, came walking down the grade with his son, Bob. Sutherland's cigar was belching smoke and so betrayed his tension. Stopping a few feet away from the man he'd once made his own, he nodded curtly.

"The years have been good to you, Mr. Sutherland," Tom said. "The old place looks better, if anythin'. Maybe Bob told you—"

"Glad to see you, of course," the Swinging-J boss said, and took the hand held out to him. "Don't you think it a little unwise to come here, Pearce?"

"No," Tom said. "Long as it's strictly business. I hear that there's a hundred head of stock for the man who can win the bronc-bustin' at the Camino Valley Rodeo. And half the prize money."

"Well," Sutherland said, and glanced at Boylan. The ramrod grinned. "All right, why not sooner or later, Howie?"

Tom Pearce saw Kit Boylan come over and join Bob Sutherland and it occurred to him that she was standing mighty close to the man.

"Come on, Pearce," Boylan said. "Figure you'd like t' try the quietest and most reasonable first? I'd say that was Cricket, wouldn't you, Mosser?"

A slat of a man with a drooping left eyelid agreed, and Pearce saw his grin before he swung his head around.

TOM GOT his rig and went into the corral. He advanced toward the

cluster of horses, shaking out his noose. He spun the loop beautifully; it floated forward and slipped over Cricket's head, and Pearce gently drew it snug.

The horse danced nervously, eying him warily. He saddled the bronc quickly and tied the latigo strap with a swift know-how that brought admiring comments from the punchers lining the fence.

The man named Mosser steadied the horse while Pearce climbed up. He held the bronc by the bridle and one ear, and when Tom had his seat let go and ran for the rail. Immediately Cricket squealed and went violently into the air and Pearce was nearly thrown clear as soon as it began.

He knew now that he'd never ridden a tougher bronc.

Cricket bucked up and down the middle of the corral, coming down vertically on forelegs with terrific jolts. The bronc kept changing ends, and it screamed with rage. Twice Pearce had to claw leather to keep from being thrown, but both times he regained the saddle and got his feet back into the lashing stirrups.

Cricket was giving him all he had. He gave the horse the spurs and striped its flanks with red at every wild jump it made. Finally he felt the bronc begin to lose bottom. Its antics ceased to be convincing and now his seat was firm. He knew he was in command and gave Cricket the taste of steel again.

Suddenly the horse quit and he fanned it along, rode it out through the gate and past Bob Sutherland and Kit Boylan, and grinned at them. He sleeved blood from his lips when he finally wheeled Cricket around out on the road that strung past the Swinging-J. He cantered back and brought the subdued bronc to a stop within five yards of Frank Sutherland and his foreman.

"You can ride, Pearce," Boylan said, and his words sounded sour on his tongue.

Ky Flack snorted in disgust. "Man, I'll say he can ride an' I ought t' know! I'll bet any man here twenty dollars he'll stay with Black Satan, an' you saw that cuss shake *me* loose."

Sutherland said, "I'll take the bet, Flack! But the bronc will not be ridden for at least two hours. That agreeable?"

"Wait," Pearce said, still edgy as a result of the questionable welcome back to the Swinging J. "If I ride that horse, I ride for you in the rodeo, Sutherland, and will expect you to hand over the cattle if I happen to win."

"Agreed," Sutherland said quickly, and a small doubt ran through Tom's mind.

Flack had failed here—and Flack had seldom run second-fiddle to any bronc-peeler, even the professionals.

"I'd like a place to rest for a while myself, Boylan," Pearce said, and glanced toward Kit.

Young Sutherland was not with her now. The girl's eyes somehow gave him the assurance that he was no longer very much alone here, and he was sure they wished him luck.

"Take him over to the bunkhouse, Mosser," Frank Sutherland said. "Let me know when you're ready, Pearce," he added.

Tom Pearce stretched out in the bunkhouse and let the soreness drain out of his bones and muscles. The back of his neck felt as if it had been struck by a heavy maul, and his tongue which he had bitten when he'd come down into the saddle too hard, was beginning to swell.

He finally relaxed completely, and slept for about an hour. Then he got up and went out and poured cold water into a big pan and splashed it over his face. He felt better. He looked toward the corral and isolated a sleek black horse he guessed was Black Satan. It occurred to him that Sutherland knew that if a man could ride that beast, then the bronc-busting prize was secure for the Swinging J.

The punchers were already bunched out by the corral. He could not find Kit Boylan anywhere, and he guessed she was up at the ranchhouse with her father and the Sutherlands. They would all have reason to talk about Tom Pearce and most likely take him back into the past with them for a while.

Bob, he thought, would be having a bad time. He would have preferred that the book had stayed closed. There was a page there he would have long since torn out if he could, but hearts and minds are not made of rags and the trunks of trees, and so the man had to live with it.

PEARCE was sitting on a bench in front of the bunkhouse when the Sutherlands appeared. Boylan and Kit were not far behind them. The foreman motioned to him and he got up, as ready as he would ever be.

He saw Mosser come away from the corral to meet Bob Sutherland, heard Ky Flack's voice, daring the Swinging-J punchers to lay their bets. Young Sutherland yelled, "Can you cover fifty, Flack?"

He followed Mosser through the gate, shaking out the noose again. The black horse watched him curiously; it was tractable enough when the loop dropped over its head. This was the kind of bronc, Pearce knew, that would blow up at a second's notice. Black Satan stood quietly while being saddled, and he only snorted a little nervously when Pearce climbed up.

Mosser said quickly when Pearce had neck-reined the black in a close figure-eight, "Hold up, Pearce. Your saddle blanket's folded under." He slid a hand under the blanket and quickly removed the fold, then stepped back.

Black Satan moved restlessly for a few moments, became quiet again. Too quiet. Tom Pearce felt the unleashed power rippling through the animal and sat tight and ready.

Black Satan let out a squeal of rage and blew up. He went mad. The horse pivoted and sunfished and switched ends in midair, and before he came back onto the ground he shook himself half out of his skin. He put fog in Pearce's eyes and pain in the rider's head as he came down with savage, stiff-legged jolts.

Pearce knew that there wasn't a meaner four-legged devil than this one in all the world as he fiercely concentrated on staying in the saddle. His neck felt broken and once he was sure that his stomach had been driven right up against his collar-bones.

Black Satan bawled and went high. He flung himself through the air and crashed down on neck and shoulders, and rolled. Pearce threw himself clear of the saddle, the blood coming out of his nose, but he was in the saddle again when the black struggled to its feet.

Black Satan stood stiff-legged for a moment, his eyes rolling and foam dripping from his mouth. He squealed and began going through his hellish repertoire of tricks again. Pearce wondered if he had strength enough to go along with the maddened horse, as Black Satan went high again. He came down stiff-legged and the shock of it came up from Pearce's waist and pounded through his body to the top of his head.

He raked the horse with his spurs and punished it with the bit, and mocked it as he kept sunfishing and changing ends. Once more it leaped high and came crashing down, but Pearce was clear again, and once more he got into the saddle when Black Satan was on his feet.

The black horse stood still and kept its head down. Its legs were ramrod stiff as it seemed to be contemplating a last desperate fight against Pearce. The rider held to the reins tight and conjured up a grin. He knew Black Satan was whipped for a while. He could hear the loud thumping of the animal's heart, and he fanned him into obedient motion and rode him around the corral before getting out of the saddle.

And now he was aware of the yells from the punchers. Above the racket, Ky Flack's strident voice came very clear.

Pearce, blood trickling from his nose, looked at the man named Mosser, then turned toward Black Satan and ran a hand under the saddle blanket. There was nothing there, but he brought his gloved hand up to his nose. He walked out of the corral and up to Mosser.

"Smells bad, that stuff, don't it, Mister?" he said. "Makes a mighty cold feel against a bronc's hide. Carbon bisulfid!"

"I wouldn't know, Pearce," Mosser said, and grinned with one side of his mouth.

Tom Pearce swung and dropped Mosser with a right to the jaw, then stepped toward Frank Sutherland.

"Get his gloves out of his pocket and smell 'em, Sutherland!" he snapped. "Thanks for the workout here. With this under my belt I ought t' be a cinch at the rodeo. For the T Anchor."

He picked up his rig and heard Kit Boylan call to him, "Tom, wait!"

He turned and looked at her and noticed that she wore no gloves. The sun was shining and the diamond on a

certain finger gave off little twinklings of light.

"Wait for what?" he said stonily. "For more of this kind of welcome home?"

Frank Sutherland said, "Get your stuff, Mosser. You're fired!"

"Let me have one whack at the skunk before he goes, Sutherland," Ky Flack said. "He could have committed murder with that stuff. Yeah, friend, you've lost the best bronc-buster I've seen in a lot of moons."

TOM PEARCE stood there and looked at Kit and told himself he should have known. He finally said, "Lots of luck an' happiness, Miss Boylan. The books I read was all wrong."

"Kit," Frank Sutherland said, "there is some bookkeepin' t' be done up to the house, an' the pay roll to make up for tomorrer. You go along with Bob."

Bob Sutherland came over and said stiffly, "You sure can ride, Tom. I'm sorry that—"

"My fault," Pearce said. "I walked in here with my eyes open, but my brain couldn't have been workin' right."

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you want," Kit's father said.

"Just long enough t' wash up," Tom Pearce said coldly. "Don't figure I could stand it any longer'n that, Boylan."

"Take a little time t' think it over, Pearce," Frank Sutherland said, his face sickly under its coat of tan. "Don't judge us by Mosser. One rotten apple don't make a whole barrel."

"Mosser?" Pearce countered. "He's the last thing on my mind, Sutherland."

He walked away, poignantly aware of the bruising he had taken from Black Satan and respecting the horse more than a lot of human beings he could mention. Ky Flack joined him over by the bunkhouse when he began to clean up.

"I'll be there bettin' on you, Mister," Flack said. "Better hurry an' figure out who you'll ride for. You've only got about five days to git that entry fee in."

"Thanks, Flack," Tom said, and gave the man a grin. "Most likely I'll see you in McCall."

Pearce saddled his own bronc a few minutes later and rode out of the Swinging-J ranch yard. Howie Boylan stood at the gate with three other punchers as he passed through.

"If you'd reconsider, Tom," Boylan said, "Sutherland would double that offer of his, I'm sure."

"Tell him I said to eat those cows, horns and all!" Pearce said, and kept on riding.

An hour before dusk, still feeling the effects of his ruckus with Black Satan, Pearce rode past the big rodeo grounds and pulled up to read the big placard that had been nailed up near the entrance. It gave the name of the contestants who would appear, and it carried a picture of a champion lady trick-rider. The eagerness he'd felt when he'd first seen these posters was no longer in him, and he was reasonably certain as he rode on into McCall that he would take no part in the rodeo.

McCall had one wide street and two other narrower thoroughfares forking away from it, and all of them were humming with activity when Pearce turned his horse over to a man at the livery stable. He angled across the main street to the Longhorn Hotel and got himself a room and went upstairs. He took off most of his clothes and stretched out on the iron-bed.

Sleep would not come despite the weariness and the soreness running through his bones. There was too much street racket boiling through the windows; there was loud talk in the room adjoining.

"I'm givin' it to you straight, Tracy," a voice said. "I just left Link Mosser over at the Queen and Ten. He said this jigger rode Sutherland's saltiest broncs, Cricket an' Black Satan, an' figgers to ride for the T Anchor."

"I never hedged on a bet yet, Jim," a gruff voice replied. "I'm goin' along with Val Suder. I've seen men ride when the chips ain't down, but in competition before a big crowd an' against big names—"

Pearce grinned ruefully. His stating of his intentions to compete for the T Anchor had been impulsive back there at Sutherland's. He'd remembered the dislike Sutherland had had for Hank Morrell, of the T Anchor. This Val Suder, he'd heard when first passing through McCall, was on the payroll of the Tumbling K.

Your bets are safe, friends, whoever you are, he thought. I'll be on my way at the crack of dawn.

He slept for about four hours. When he went out into the street again he heard a man say, "That's him there. That's Pearce."

He slowed his gait and looked toward the doorway of the saloon. Two punchers came toward him, and one gestured for him to hold up for a minute. He was a mild-appearing moon-faced man.

"Pearce," he said. "We heard you figure to ride in the rodeo for Hank Morrell, an' I figure he'd be glad t' hear that. That's our brand, Pearce, an' we'll be ridin' back there in about a half hour."

"Give me another day or so t' make up my mind," Pearce said. "Tell Morrell if I decide t' compete it'll most likely be for him."

THE URGE to leave McCall was strong, but the temptation to dig his spurs deep into a man's pride was stronger. During the rest of the night and all the next day Pearce tried to reach a decision. He would have never ridden back here if it had not been for Kit Boylan, and the thought of putting her out of his mind for the rest of his life cut through him like a knife.

While he went through the motions of eating supper he was sure that a lot of the townspeople were spreading the old story, and no doubt adding to it. People chose to forget the good things in a man when they have one of his transgressions to chew on.

A light rain was falling when he left the restaurant and the lamplights were blobs of pale yellow in the fog. Tom Pearce welcomed this weather that was as dreary as his thoughts, and walked aimlessly along the wide street. He swung left where it forked and passed a lumber yard he remembered as a kid.

Abruptly, before he could snap fully alert, he saw the dim figures jump at him quickly. He was knocked against the fence before he could lift a hand, and his brain spun for a few moments from the blow of the heavy fist.

Pearce heard the hinges of the door in the fence creak as he was shoved roughly toward another silhouette in the mist. Some inner voice told him to take desperate evasion action here, and he pitched to the left. Something slammed heavily against the boards of the fence and grazed his shoulder before he could pivot and tumble through the opening and into the lumber yard. He heard the voices plainly now as he got to his feet and ran.

"Let him have it!" an angry voice ripped through the dark, and Pearce threw himself down near a pile of lumber. The roar of the six-gun split the night, and then Pearce heard a man's curse.

"You fools!" the voice said hoarsely, "You'll bring the whole town down on —Let's get out of here!"

Tom Pearce was not aware that the bullet had burned his hip until he lifted himself up after a wary five-minute wait. He felt the blood trickle down his leg. The spooks had tried with a club first, and then had resorted to extreme measures.

Several men were outside the lumber yard when he came out through the fence door. One of them was the McCall sheriff, a bulky man with a bull-like voice. He got a firm hold on Pearce's shoulder and told him to come along for disturbing the peace.

"I'm Tom Pearce," the bronc-buster said, and shook himself loose. "Some tough jiggers waylaid me here an' figgered to cripple or kill me. I ain't quite sure who they were. Maybe they've bet their money on Val Suder."

"You hit?" the sheriff asked.

"Just nicked," Pearce said. "I'll see the doctor."

He came out to the wide street with the lawman. Suddenly, he stopped and looked at the girl coming straight toward him in the fog. Her eyes were anxious and sorely troubled. He pulled a wide grin and tipped his hat with an exaggerated flourish.

"Evenin', Miss Boylan. Seems like the Swingin' J just can't afford to lose," he said.

"Sheriff," Kit Boylan said, her eyes on Pearce, "I want you to arrest a man named Link Mosser. He's sure to be somewhere in town."

"The charges, Miss Boylan?" the lawman said. "You have to have charges against a man."

"I'll make them when we find him, Sheriff," the girl said.

"All right," the sheriff said impa-

tiently, "we'll look for the man. . . . Go get that leg looked at, Pearce."

"Not yet, Sheriff," Pearce said. "Not if I'd been hit in both. I crave to meet up with Link Mosser again myself!"

They finally found Mosser in front of the frame building that had been taken over by the committee in charge of the Camino Valley Rodeo.

Mosser glanced their way, casually sucked smoke out of a bare inch of cigarette and then snapped the butt away from him. Just as casually, he resumed conversation with a short man wearing a cowhide vest and tight dungarees.

"Mosser," Kit Boylan said, "will you come here a minute?"

"Figure I can always spare you some time, Kit," Mosser said. "Evenin', Pearce. Hope you forgot that whizzer I run on you. Was all in fun. I—"

"Mosser," the girl said, "I want to see the money you have in your pocket."

"Huh?" The cowpuncher grunted. "Now what business is that of yours?"

"I'll tell you," Kit Boylan said, and Tom Pearce shook his head wonderingly when he caught the sheriff's glance. "You know that I make up the pay roll at the Swinging J, don't you?"

"Of course," Mosser snorted. "You mean somebody stole it? I've been in town ever since your father fired me, an' I can prove it."

"And I aim to prove you just tried to cripple Pearce," the girl said. "You can prove you didn't by letting me see the money you have in your pocket."

MOSSER laughed. He reached into his pocket and came up with a small roll of bills.

"Sixty dollars there, Ma'am," he said. "I figure to run it up t' ten times that much 'fore I leave town."

"Judging from your breath," Kit Boylan said, "you had more than this a while ago, Mosser!"

She examined the bills, peeled three of them off and handed them to the sheriff.

"Sheriff," the girl said, "see if those aren't marked with my initials in red ink: 'K. B.'"

The lawman studied each of the bank notes carefully, holding them up to the light fanning out from the building window. He nodded.

"They are, Ma'am," he said and handed them back.

"What kind of a game is this, Kit?" Tom Pearce asked impatiently.

"Mosser, you know that Bob Sutherland draws a hundred dollars a month from the Swinging-J," the girl went on, ignoring Pearce. "I put five twenties in his envelope yesterday, and I marked them all. How did three of them find their way into your pocket?"

Mosser's poker-face began to fall apart, and the drooping lid of his bad eye twitched violently. Suddenly he caught himself and laughed defiantly.

"All right, I borrowed sixty from Bob," he said.

The lawman spread his hands wide. "If you can't prove he didn't, Ma'am, let's not waste more of my time. What's behind all this?"

"Mosser is lying," Kit Boylan said. "I don't care what anyone else thinks, Sheriff. I've proven something to myself I should have never doubted long ago. Bob Sutherland hired Mosser to cripple Tom Pearce, or worse. It's jealousy and hate that made him do it. And possibly he has bet high on Val Suder in the rodeo.

"Well, I'd leave town before tomorrow, Mosser, if I were you, because I'm going to ride back to the ranch and tell Bob that you messed things up, and that you told everything the way it happened. There will be only one thing left for him to do, Mosser!"

The man in the cowhide vest jumped up, started to blurt out something, when Mosser shoved him backward, cried, "Shut your mouth or—"

The sheriff drew his six-gun and smiled with evident relish. "Better start back to the ranch right away, Ma'am. I'm lockin' these two up. Seems like the snap will be given away at this end or the other. Take their guns, Pearce."

Pearce jumped toward Mosser, and was glad when the ex-Swinging-J rider showed some resistance. He banged Mosser in the face with a fist and then shouldered him against the side of the building and worried him to his knees. The man in the cowhide vest stood and waited until he was relieved of his six-gun.

Tom Pearce walked to where Kit

Boylan stood. He bared his head and looked at her.

"Thanks, Kit," Pearce said. "As long as you believe, nobody else can matter."

"I guess I always have," Kit said softly. "Ride back with me, Tom. There are things that have to be ironed out."

The miles back to the Swinging-J were much too short, but at the same time were long enough for Tom Pearce to find out beyond all doubt that the pattern of the rest of his days was right here in Camino Valley.

Frank Sutherland and his son were sitting near the big fireplace in the living room at the ranchhouse when Tom Pearce walked in with Kit. Pearce suddenly felt sorry for Bob. All the blood drained out of the puncher's face as he stiffened in his chair.

"Well, Kit," Sutherland said, "so you brought him back. Sit down, Pearce."

Kit Boylan started right in from the beginning, and when she came to the part about the marked bills Bob Sutherland's hand involuntarily slid toward his pocket. Frank Sutherland had a harassed expression in his eyes.

"It occurred to me when they played that trick on Tom when he rode Black Satan," Kit said. "I wondered then if a man who would stoop to such a thing wouldn't have lied about that shooting accident some years ago, and if he wouldn't keep on doing rotten things as long as a certain someone kept showing him who was the better man. Mr. Sutherland, you must know now that Tom told the truth."

Frank Sutherland got to his feet and his face became as hard as rock. He looked down at his son and said, "I think I knew it then, Kit. I didn't want to believe anyone but my own flesh and blood. . . Bob, you put Mosser and those toughs on Tom, didn't you?"

The son dropped his head in his hands. He didn't have to say anything.

"All right, Bob" Frank Sutherland said. "Tomorrow you pack your things and go to our Lost River outfit. You'll work there for as long as I see fit as a common puncher. That outfit is tough, but don't come yellin' for help. You'll come back here a man or you'll light out somewheres else with a string of wet spaghetti for a spine! It's up to you. I figure that's a small price t' pay for what you did to Tom."

Bob Sutherland got up and looked at Pearce. "I'll say it now—the accident happened like Tom said. I'll wait until I come back to ask him if he won't try and put it out of his mind. . . Kit, I knew somehow you could never belong to me." He turned and walked out of the room and Tom Pearce knew he'd hold up his end at Lost River.

"Well, Tom," Sutherland said, "you know where your old room is. You sign up with Morrell?"

"No," Pearce said. "Couldn't bring myself to do it, Mr. Sutherland. Guess I'll be ridin' for the Swingin'-J."

"Kit," Frank Sutherland said, a catch in his voice, "let me talk to this ranahan alone for a while."

"All right," Kit said. "But see that he dresses that bullet burn on his leg. He's got some riding to do."

THEY had some mighty good men in the Camino Valley Rodeo, but Tom Pearce, riding for the Swinging-J, rode them all into the dust. Glued to the back of the worst outlaw bronc they could produce, he rode beyond the timer's gun while the big crowd thundered applause. Thinking of the things Frank Sutherland had said to him the night Kit had brought him back from McCall, and what he'd heard from Kit the night before this stampede—well, nothing lived that could throw him!

After he'd been called the greatest bronc-peeler ever to perform in a Camino Valley Rodeo, he leaned into the Sutherland box and kissed Kit.

"Let that hombre orate," Tom Pearce said. "Only one place I crave to stay as tophand."

And a few minutes later, he sat between Boylan and Kit and watched the pretty lady trick-rider display her talents and was little impressed. The world was sure bright and he had no grudges. Suddenly he said to Kit:

"I'm sure glad we turned Link Mosser loose as free as a bird. Figure he got Black Satan so mean that day, these broncs here seemed easy for me."

"Got enough for today, folks," Frank Sutherland said. "Let's go on home."

Tom Pearce felt warm inside. Had there ever been a sweeter four-letter word—home?

The MAN on the PINTO

By REX SHERRICK

They halted their horses in the shade of a tree

Tilda McKenzie, girl owner of the Wagon Wheel, had no time for romance!

THE man and the girl rode side by side, holding their horses to a walk. The rolling range was bright with the new colors of spring. The sun, perching on the peaks of the mountains to the westward, was still warm, though the afternoon was almost over. Soon it would be night.

"I'm sure you understand, Hugh," Tilda McKenzie said, a strange pleading note in her voice. "There is no time for romance in my life—at least not now. Perhaps later—in a year or so. When I'm certain that I can manage the Wagon Wheel as Dad did for all those years, I may feel differently."

"Perhaps," Hugh Young said bitterly. "But I may not even be here then. Sometimes when a man finds he can't get the girl he loves to marry him, he rides on."

They halted their horses in the shade of a tree as they topped a rise and sat gazing down the other side of the hill. Tilda found it hard to realize that as far as she could see in any direction was part of her range. The month that had passed since Angus McKenzie had died seemed a weird dream.

Beneath her black hat the auburn hair, that she wore shoulder length, was burnished copper. The face it framed was lovely, and yet the slender girl dressed in shirt and levis and cowboy boots was no fragile flower.

Twenty-four years ago Tilda McKenzie had been born in the Wagon Wheel ranchhouse. Angus McKenzie had ridden ten miles through a raging blizzard that night to bring the doctor back with him. At midnight old Doctor Cranston had delivered a seven-pound baby girl. A girl that would have the same red hair that was her mother's crowning glory.

Tilda had grown up on the ranch, the only child of Angus and Nan McKenzie.

From the time she was seven she had been able to ride. At ten she was riding to the little red school house in the valley on her own pony. Her father had taught her to shoot and to handle a rope. Then when Tilda was fourteen her mother had died from pneumonia.

Angus McKenzie had sent his daughter East to finish her education. A year ago Tilda had graduated from a girls' college and returned to the Wagon Wheel to stay. In New York she had attended the rodeo at Madison Square Garden every year and loved it. The contestants were her kind of people. The horses and all the rest of the stock were part of the life she had known on the ranch. The very sight of them made her homesick.

THIS past year she had been unusually fortunate for through mutual friends she had met quite a few of the contestants. When they learned she had been raised on a Texas ranch, they accepted her as one of them. There was one lean young cowboy named Bob Lindsey whom Tilda knew she would never forget. But that was a secret that she kept locked in her heart.

When she had returned to the ranch a year ago she had found this tall, dark man, who now rode beside her, had been made foreman of the outfit during the twelve months she had been away for her final year at college. She liked Hugh Young, and yet there was something about him that she did not quite understand.

He was at least ten years older than she was—a strange silent man who lived in a world of his own. Yet her father had told her before he died that Hugh was doing an excellent job in handling the seven other men in the outfit.

"Hugh makes a good foreman," Angus McKenzie said. "The best I've had working for me since old Marty Blake quit. You won't find Hugh ordering a man to do a job that he wouldn't do himself, and he sure has plenty of range savvy."

"But who is he, Dad?" Tilda asked. "Where does he come from?"

"Arizona, I think," McKenzie said. "I never asked. Nearly a year ago at spring roundup time Hugh Young rode in and asked for a job. I needed a few extra hands so I hired him. He proved to be a tophand so I kept him on and finally decided to make him foreman. I haven't been sorry."

It had been just a few days before Angus McKenzie's horse had thrown him and he had died of a broken neck, that Tilda had talked to her father about the foreman.

Since then Hugh Young had been very kind to her. He had kept the ranch running without even asking her to give any orders. This afternoon they had gone for a ride. To her surprise Hugh had told her that he loved her and asked her to marry him.

Now Hugh's words about riding on, if he couldn't get the girl he loved to marry him, worried her.

"You mean you are leaving the Wagon Wheel?" she asked. "That you're going to quit your job as foreman."

"Perhaps," Hugh said. "Haven't made up my mind about that yet."

"I don't want you to go," Tilda said slowly, idly watching a rider who was heading toward the hill. The horseman was still too far off to be recognized. "I need you to help me run the ranch, Hugh."

"And that's all," Hugh Young said, his gaze also fixed on the approaching rider. "I just happen to make a fair to middling foreman for your outfit." He looked at her, his dark eyes intent on her beauty. "You must marry me, Tilda. You're all I want in this world."

"I'm sorry, Hugh," she said, finding something almost frightening in the intensity of his gaze. "I—I told you there was no time for romance in my life now, and I meant it."

"I don't believe you," Hugh said, edging his horse closer to the buckskin mare Tilda rode. "I've never kissed you, but I'm going to do it now and see if you can still say that."

"No, Hugh, please!" Tilda said as he

reached for her with the intention of putting his arm around her. "Don't! There's someone coming."

The approaching rider was close—so close that the thudding of his horse's hoofs were loud as he headed the pinto up the hill. Hugh drew away from Tilda with almost a sullen expression on his face. She looked at the rider on the pinto and then an expression of amazement swept over her pretty face as she recognized the man in the saddle.

"Bob Lindsey!" Tilda exclaimed delightedly. "What on earth are you doing in this part of the country?"

LINDSEY smiled as he halted the pinto close to the mare. "It really is you, Tilda," he said. "I been visiting some folks in this part of Texas. When they told me that Tilda McKenzie was the owner of the Wagon Wheel and the ranch wasn't far away, I just had to come looking for you soon as I could make it."

"I'm glad," Tilda said. "It is so nice to see you, Bob. New York and the rodeo seem like something that happened back in the dim ages. Yet it was only a year ago."

"A year is much too long to go without seeing you, Tilda," Bob said. Then he apparently noticed Hugh for the first time, and blinked. "Lee Norton!" he shouted. "This is a double surprise."

Tilda glanced at Hugh and saw him do a strange thing. He reached for his holstered gun as though about to draw. Then his right hand dropped and he sat in the saddle glaring at the new arrival.

"Afraid you made a mistake, hombre," Hugh said coldly. "The name is Hugh Young. Never heard of Lee Norton."

"Sorry," Bob said. "My mistake. But you sure look enough like Lee Norton to be his twin brother."

"Bob is an old friend of mine, Hugh," Tilda said quickly. "We met at the rodeo in New York a year ago. Bob, Mr. Young is the foreman of the Wagon Wheel."

"Guess I had better be getting back to the ranch," Hugh said. "Reckon you two old friends have a lot to talk about."

He wheeled his sorrel and rode away, heading back down the other side of the hill toward the ranch buildings two miles to the north.

"And that seems like the ending of a beautiful friendship before it even started," Bob said with a smile. "Does your foreman dislike strangers in general or me in particular, Tilda?"

"I don't know." Tilda frowned. "He is usually polite to my friends. He had something on his mind."

"So I gathered." Bob Lindsey gazed at her, the blue eyes in his lean, good looking face twinkling. "When a fellow reaches for his boss like he aims to kiss her, and has to quit because another man rides up, it's likely to spoil the whole day for him."

"You saw that?" Tilda asked in surprise.

"I did." Bob swung out of the saddle, dropping the pinto's reins so the horse stood ground-hitched. "But let's stay here awhile. Hugh Young had a good idea when he said we'd have a lot to talk about."

"All right," Tilda said, as she started to dismount.

Bob moved close to her. His arms went around her as her feet hit the ground. She did not struggle, nor make any attempt to get away. She had dropped the mare's reins.

"Tilda, honey," Bob said. "A year is a mighty long time."

"I know, darling," Tilda said softly.

She lifted her head and their lips met. In that breathless moment it seemed to Tilda that the world stood still. Finally Bob released her.

"That last night we had dinner together back in New York I asked you to marry me," Bob said. "You said that you thought you loved me, but that you wanted to be sure. You told me you were going back to the ranch to be with your father, and if I still felt the same in a year's time, to ask you again if you would marry me."

"I know," Tilda said. "But after I came back home you never wrote me, Bob. I didn't tell Dad much about you before he died."

"I've been traveling all over the country entering every rodeo that I could as a contestant," Bob said. "Bought me a little ranch of my own three months ago with the prize money I won in the rodeos." He smiled. "A man should have a home for his bride."

"What about the Wagon Wheel?" Tilda asked. "Suppose I should tell you that I will marry you. Does that mean you expect me to give up the ranch I have lived on all my life?"

"I hadn't thought about that," Bob said a bit blankly. "But I reckon we can work something out."

A FRIENDLY smile curved Tilda's lips as she surveyed him.

"Suppose you have dinner with me at the Wagon Wheel tonight and we'll talk it over," Tilda said. Abruptly she changed the subject. "Who is this Lee Norton who looks too much like Hugh?"

"A man I knew five years ago in Arizona," Bob said. "We worked for the same outfit for awhile—but Lee left. I heard something about his having run into trouble with the law, but I never believed it. The man I knew had a jagged scar from an old knife wound on his left arm just below the elbow."

"I see," said Tilda as she walked toward her horse. "I'm going back to the ranch now, Bob. I'd rather you didn't go with me, but be at the Wagon Wheel tonight at six for dinner."

"I'll be there, darling," Bob said.

Tilda picked up the mare's reins and swung into the saddle. Bob stood watching as she rode away. She glanced back and waved to him.

When she got back to the ranchhouse, she turned the mare over to one of the men and hurried up to her room to change her clothes. She bathed and dressed in an attractive looking yellow dress with a fairly low cut neck line.

It was still daylight—it would not be dark until after seven. When she came downstairs, she found Hugh Young waiting for her in the big living room. He stood gazing at her, his expression strangely hard.

"I was watching," Hugh said coldly. "I saw you let Lindsey kiss you. Do you think I'm going to stand for that?"

"I can't see that it is any of your business," Tilda snapped. At times she could display the temper that is supposed to go with red hair. "Suppose I told you that I intend to marry Bob?"

"That will never happen," Hugh said. "The next time you see Lindsey—and judging from the way you are dressed it looks like you expect him here tonight—you are going to tell him you don't love him, and never want to see him again."

"And just why should I do anything like that?" Tilda demanded.

"You wouldn't like Lindsey to have a fatal accident like the one that killed your father, would you?" Hugh shook his head as he saw the look of horror on Tilda's face. "No, I didn't kill the Old Man—that was a real accident. But Lindsey's death could be made to look like an accident."

"But why?" demanded Tilda. "Why should you think of a thing like that, Hugh?"

"I've planned on marrying you ever since you came back from the East," Hugh said. "This is a big, well-paying ranch. The man who married the owner would be doing all right for himself." He noticed the button on the right cuff of his flannel shirt was missing, so he casually rolled up the sleeve. Tilda stared at the jagged scar of the old knife wound on his right arm. He caught her glance. "Lindsey was right, I was Lee Norton until I changed my name. The Law was too hot on Norton's trail."

"You win," Tilda said resignedly. "I'll tell Bob that I won't marry him. I don't want him to die."

"Good," said Hugh. "I'll be watching, so don't make any mistakes, Tilda."

She waited until he left the living room and she heard his footsteps out on

the porch and going down the steps. Then she looked wildly around. She saw her father's gunbelt still hanging from a peg on the wall with the Colt still in the holster. She drew out the gun and made sure it was loaded. Then she dashed through the ranchhouse and out the back door. Reaching the big barn without being seen, she climbed the ladder that led up into the hayloft. She made her way to the double doors that could be opened so the hay could be loaded into the loft.

Tilda pushed open one of the doors just wide enough so that she could peer out. From here she had a good view of the front of the ranchhouse. She watched and waited for what seemed a long time. Finally Bob Lindsey rode into the ranch yard on his pinto.

As he came to the porch of the ranchhouse and swung out of the saddle, Hugh suddenly appeared. The two men talked for a few minutes and seemed to be arguing about something. They were not close enough for Tilda to hear their voices for they spoke in low tones.

It dawned on her that Bob was wearing no gun and Hugh's .45 was in his holster. Finally Bob turned, still holding the pinto's reins. Evidently he planned to tie the horse at the hitching-rail near the porch. Hugh drew his gun and aimed it at Bob's back.

"No!" wailed Tilda. "I won't let you shoot him."

She shoved the loft door wide open and the gun in her own hand roared. Hugh staggered and dropped his gun as the bullet got him in the right arm. Bob whirled and dropped the horse's reins. Snatching up the Colt, he covered the foreman with it.

Tilda hurried down from the loft and out of the barn. In a few moments she was telling Bob and some of the Wagon Wheel waddies of the threats that Hugh Young had made. The cowboys grabbed the foreman and took him away to be turned over to the sheriff in town.

"How about selling me a half interest in the Wagon Wheel?" Bob asked when he and Tilda were alone. "I could sell my spread and move in here."

"Why not?" said Tilda. "It would be all in the family."

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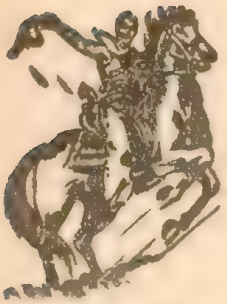
The Rodeo Announcer



IT HAS been said that a rodeo announcer must have the memory of an elephant. He has to remember and tell the crowd and the contestants all about everyone and everything that is going on—and do it fast. He has to fill in the waits and delays with interesting chatter, and keep things going with snap and zest.

When a contestant appears in the arena ready to make his ride or bulldog a steer, the announcer must give the cowboy's name, tell what part of the country he is from, and reveal the honors he may have received in previous rodeos. Usually the announcer must do all that in just about the time it takes that cowboy to come flying out of a chute on a wild bucking horse.

The rodeo announcer needs to be well acquainted with the stock in the show. He understands all the tricks of the bulls and broncs, savvies which horses are particularly mean, and which bulls are unusually dangerous—and he tells the audience about them.

The contestants are his friends. He knows them all by their first names, and they consider him as one of themselves. There are instances when announcers have been contestants before they discovered their ability to talk to the crowds. They know what it is like to ride a bucking horse and to be thrown, too.

When an announcer says, "This is Tom Smith, your announcer, introducing the events of the afternoon," it means his work is just starting and he has to keep right on going until the show is over. It's a good announcer who keeps things humming, or as they say in the profession, "Tells 'em!"

—William Carter

ALL THE WAY

by A.C. Abbott

Johnny's loop sailed true

Johnny Davis stakes his future on the memory of Twister, rodeo outlaw!

THEY had come all the way together, those three—Johnny Davis, range orphan, and the two he had raised from colts. The little dun named Twister and the mouse colored pony called Blue were more than just horses to Johnny. They were all he had in the world, his "folks." They received all the love he had to give, and he received from them all the love he ever got.

At fifteen Johnny was a wiry bow-legged top hand cowboy. He had made his own hard way in a hard man's world for five years, but he was certainly down on his luck now.

"I don't know," he said slowly, looking at the two ponies who were watching him with prick-eared interest from a far corner of the corral. "Nobody's ever rode him but me."

The genial doctor laughed. "Shucks! I rode quite a bit when I was younger. I guess I can handle a kid's pony. I'll give you a hundred dollars for that dun."

Johnny shifted the weight from his aching right leg and wrenched his eyes from Twister's eager little head. A voice inside him wanted to yell out, "That horse isn't for sale, mister! Not for any amount of money. If I was starvin' to death, I wouldn't sell that little horse. He's my pard!"

And that inside voice meant it. Many a time Johnny had tightened his belt and spent his last dollar on a good feed of grain for his horses. But it wasn't his own belt that would have to be taken up this time. Johnny was in debt.

The inside voice grew mute before the cold staring eyes of facts. Johnny had bumped up against a run of bad luck.

On a line-riding job during the summer he had got tangled up with a rope, a steer and a spooky bronc, and he had not been able to work since. Now he was back on his feet. But winter was coming on, fall roundups were over, and there were no jobs to be had. Johnny knew that for a fact because he had tried every outfit for miles around. He still owed the doctor sixty dollars, and a hundred was a good price for a horse Twister's size.

"Slick as a whistle," the doctor mused, his admiring eyes on the dull yellow of Twister's heavy coat. "Kid, that hundred would clear you here, and maybe you can get work farther south. I don't want to tell you your business, but this is a hard country in the winter."

"Yeah," Johnny mumbled miserably, "I know."

It wasn't just the doctor bill. He had kept the two horses in the town stable while he looked for work, and soon now the livery man would be taking them to pay the feed bill. It looked as if he would have to sell one of them or lose them both.

"He'll have a good home with me," the doctor said gently. "Plenty of feed and not much work. You won't need to worry about him."

BUT Johnny didn't look at Twister again. He looked away over the mountains to the south, and maybe there was a prayer in his heart to make up for the helpless tears in his eyes. He swallowed hard, took a deep breath and held it.

"All right," he said finally. "He's yours. But don't sell him to nobody else, doc. I'll be back after him, some day—soon."

A light snow was falling early the next morning when Johnny rode out of town on Blue. He was headed south, his few belongings tied into a small roll behind his saddle.

He was fighting a clogging lump in his throat, and the blue horse wasn't making it any easier for him. The little horse seemed to realize that this time they wouldn't be coming back after a day's circle, that they were leaving Twister behind. His gait was erratic, his eyes and ears on the back trail, and he kept nickering back over his shoulder. Johnny knew, even after they were beyond hearing, that the missing partner was walking the corral fence and also calling. That didn't help, either.

"Don't you fret, little horse," Johnny said, blinking rapidly as he ran his hand along Blue's thick mane. "We'll find a job somewhere. We just got to! Then we'll go back after Twister. It's no fun driftin' without him."

Ordinarily Johnny felt pretty much of a man, the kind of man he remembered his cowboy father had been. Jack Davis it was who had given him the two baby colts when he was seven years old. Three years later Jack Davis had gone down in front of a stampede.

Since then Johnny had held down a man's job, both on the range and in the horse breaking corral. He had earned a man's pay, and he had never asked a favor from anybody. But this morning, with the collar of his heavy coat turned up against the snow and his free hand deep under the flap of his leather chaps, he felt like just what he was—a homeless kid.

He covered a zigzag two hundred miles before he finally landed a job for the winter, in a line camp of a big cow outfit. The camp was snug, plenty of grub and reading material, good feed for the stock, a second puncher for help and company. Johnny fought his restlessness and tried to settle down to the job at hand—the job that would make the coming spring a happy one.

The two riders were in the saddle most of the time, breaking trail for snowbound stock, bringing in the weaker cattle that needed to be fed. Johnny was riding company horses, good enough horses but without the "savvy" that made Blue and Twister such a pleasure to ride. Often, when he was struggling to get weak cattle through a blizzard or

trying to break trail through heavy drifts, he wished he had the little dun under his saddle. Not that Johnny would have used him for company work if he'd had him, but riding other horses made him only the more lonesome.

Blue was lonesome, too. Johnny should have turned him out with the remuda, but he was afraid the horse would drift. As it was, the little blue had nothing to do through the long months but fill up on good hay and stay snug in the big shed by the corrals. But he didn't nicker up an acquaintance with any of the other horses. Many times on clear days Johnny would find him with his nose over the corral, pointing north, and sometimes he would whinny, long and piercingly.

Johnny would talk to him then and scratch his ears, but he couldn't take the place of the little dun horse. "Don't you worry, Blue boy," he would say. "We'll get him back. This winter can't last forever, and the minute the grass starts showin' through so these blasted critters won't starve, we'll light a shuck. We'll get him."

All of which didn't help Johnny to stay on the job, especially after he had worked long enough to earn the necessary hundred dollars. His boyish eagerness was hard to quell, but he was too good a cowboy to leave when the cattle needed his care.

However, with the first indication that spring had really come and the cattle could now shift for themselves, Johnny threw his saddle on Blue and pulled out. He rode to the company headquarters, picked up his time, and headed north, a song in his heart.

Blue lined out this time without a fight, falling eagerly into his mile-eating running walk. He had not forgotten.

JOHNNY was all boy as he rode back into the little cow town where he had left Twister the fall before, his spurs and his money both a-jingling. He would give all that money, if necessary, to get Twister back. Then, with his "family" once more intact, he would join some outfit at the spring roundup wagon and everything would be all right once more.

As he swung into the wide dusty main street, he saw the portly doctor step out of the post office and turn toward his house. Johnny touched spurs to the blue and was soon beside the older man, swinging down and extending an eager hand.

"Howdy, Doc," he said, trying hard to sound casual—and failing.

"Why, hello there, kid." The friendly doctor looked momentarily startled, but a warm smile lit his face as he met the proferred hand. "Haven't let any more broncs fall on you?"

"Nope." Johnny grinned in embarrassment and hitched at his chaps. Then he blurted boyishly, "I want to buy Twister back. I got the money. How much you want?"

"Got a job, huh? Glad to hear it." The doctor looked down at the ground between his feet, and a slight frown puckered his brows. "I got some kind of bad news for you, Johnny. That dun horse went bad after you left."

Johnny grinned broadly. "What's the matter? Buck you off?"

"Four times to be exact. I never did ride him."

The doctor grinned ruefully over his admission, while Johnny felt a glow of pride in his little dun horse.

"That pony can sure make your saddle hard to find when he takes a notion," he said, with ill-concealed satisfaction. "But he settles right down, once he finds out you mean business. Where is he?"

"I don't know exactly." The doctor scratched the back of his head and shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I didn't think you really meant it about coming back. I thought, just a kid, you know, you'd soon attach yourself to some other horse."

"There ain't any other horse," Johnny said quickly. "Not like Twister. Did he get away?"

"I sold him, Johnny."

"Sold him?" Johnny echoed blankly. "Shucks, Doc, I told you not to. I told you I'd be back."

"I know you did, Johnny, and I'm sorry. But I couldn't afford to keep him around just for an ornament, and he was throwing riders just as fast as they crawled on him. He went plumb haywire, but even so I'd have done something if I'd known what he meant to you."

Johnny's voice was full of disappointment and self accusation. "Nobody had ever rode him but me. I reckon he just couldn't understand."

"Don't you believe it, kid. That horse had a bad streak in him and it just came to the top. They'll do that, you know."

But Johnny didn't know it, not about that horse. "You don't know Twister," was all he said.

Johnny's emotions were all mixed up. There was pride in his horse for throwing strange riders, keen disappointment over not being able to get him right away. There was also a feeling of guilt. He had let his friend down, gone off and left him. And the horse, bewildered and frightened, had started fighting. That was Johnny's fault, but he would make it up to the pony just as soon as he got him back.

"Who'd you sell him to?" he asked quietly.

"Feller named Jack Kinney," the doctor replied uneasily. "He owns a bucking string, furnishes horses for rodeos. That's why I can't tell exactly where he is now."

The bottom dropped out of Johnny's stomach then. He felt sick all over, but hot anger rose to help him. He started to curse.

"Now take it easy, Johnny," the older man said kindly. "Believe me, that's all Twister's good for now. He's gone bad and there's nothing you can do about it. Ask any of the boys around here who tried to handle him. You don't want that horse. Why, you couldn't even ride him now."

"Don't you believe it," Johnny said deliberately, and the boy in him was all gone. An inner voice kept hammering at him that he had lost his horse, but he wasn't ready to admit it. He'd find him yet. He'd show them how bad that horse was! "I don't blame you I guess, Doc. It's my fault for sellin' him in the first place, but I've got to find him quick now before they ruin him completely. You got any idea where this Kinney might be now?"

SLOWLY the doctor shook his head. "Well, no, Johnny, I haven't. He's down in the southern country somewhere, putting on early spring shows, but I did hear he was going to have his string in Laramie for the Fourth of July."

"Ah! Well, thanks." Johnny turned toward his horse.

"Wait, Johnny." Johnny wasn't sure whether the doctor's face expressed sympathy, regret, fear, or just what; but he was at least sure that the man was sincere. "I'm really sorry the way this has turned out, and I want to wish you luck. I hope you get your horse."

Johnny's eyes were bleak, and his lean young face was set in hard lines as he swung onto the blue's back. "I'll get him," he said grimly, "if I have to steal him." . . .

On the third of July Johnny rode slowly into Laramie armed with two hundred dollars and an invincible determination. If he didn't have enough money to buy Twister back, then he would get more; but he was not leaving Laramie without the horse.

The streets were crowded with boisterous cowboys and excited townspeople. Banners hung from lamp posts and from lines strung across the street. The air seemed filled with the invitation to celebrate, but Johnny had neither the time nor the inclination. Not yet!

He went directly to the rodeo grounds and there, in a large, high boarded corral, he found the bucking stock. As Johnny started to climb the high board fence, a cowboy handler called to him.

"Hey, kid! What you doin'?"

"Just lookin' 'em over."

"Uh-huh." The handler got rid of a cheekful of tobacco juice before he said, warningly, "You want to do all your lookin' from the top of that fence, cowboy. Them broncs ain't kiddin'." The man then passed on around the corral and out of view, whistling.

As Johnny reached the top of the fence and settled himself, his eyes flashed hungrily over the big quiet herd. Then his heart leaped high into his throat and lodged there. Not over twenty feet away stood Twister, dozing, head down.

Instantly Johnny saw that he was in excellent condition, round and fat as a seal. Right then, that was all that mattered.

"Twister!" Johnny called softly.

Blue's ears went up, but Twister kept on sleeping. Again Johnny called. Twister flicked one ear, shifted his feet slightly, and went back to sleep. Johnny was ready to call again when Blue beat him to it. The blue horse, recognizing his lost partner, let out a blasting whinny that set up echoes all over the arena.

Twister jumped and snorted wildly, head up, ears flicking nervously. That call had stung him, and he answered before he was wide enough awake to locate Blue there beyond the fence. Then the two horses were rubbing noses through the fence, nickering happy greetings, while Johnny alternately laughed and swallowed at the obstruction in his throat.

Johnny wanted to get down there and get his hands on Twister, but he remembered that the horse still belonged to someone else. So he contented himself just looking and thinking about the bright trails ahead for the three of them.

"Come on, Blue," he said finally, dropping to the ground. "We got a date with a man named Kinney. He don't know it yet, but he's about to collect two hundred dollars. Be right back, Twister," he assured the dun. "Then we'll blow this town and hunt us up a job somewhere."

He located Kinney by the bucking chutes, where he was giving instructions to the stock handlers. He was a big man, flashily dressed in whipcord trousers and spotted calfskin vest. His beaver colored Stetson covered black hair that, Johnny noticed, was tinged with gray.

Johnny watched his chance to catch the man alone and then lost no time in introducing himself and stating his business.

"How much you want for that dun bucker?" he asked bluntly.

"Twister? He's not for sale."

"Sure, he's for sale," Johnny said, ignoring the note of finality in Kinney's voice. "Anything is, you get enough for it. I'll give you two hundred dollars for him."

Kinney laughed. "You're not talking my language a-tall, cowboy. Two hundred dollars? Chicken feed!"

Johnny's heart sank, but somehow he managed to retain his easy manner. "How much then, mister? That horse kind of took my eye."

"Took your eye, did he?" Kinney showed an amused grin. "You get close enough to him and he'll take your hide. No, you better go back home, sonny, and stick to the ponies. That horse isn't for sale."

"What's the least you'd take for him?" Johnny persisted, fighting his disappointment. This meant he would have to work awhile longer before getting Twister back, but he'd get him.

A QUEER light came into Kinney's gray eyes as he squinted at Johnny. "You don't seem to get the drift, Kid. You can't buy that horse."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Plenty of reason. He's the best bucker I got. A lot of contracts been coming my way just because he's in the string. He's making a name for himself—and for me. No, you might as well forget him, sonny. Get yourself a

Shetland pony."

Suddenly Johnny saw red. Sonny, nothing! He was a better cowboy right now than this Kinney would ever be, and he knew a heap sight more about horses. Shetland pony!

"I don't forget easy, mister!" he said flatly, and he turned back to Blue.

Johnny put in a long miserable night in the loft of the stable where his blue pony was munching hay. He didn't know what he was going to do now. He couldn't think. All he could do was feel —feel the loss of his horse more keenly than at any time since he'd first sold him.

The next morning Johnny was among the many cowboys hanging around the corrals behind the chutes when the bucking stock was brought in, the buckers for that day to be cut out. Twister was a "final" horse and wouldn't be used on this first day of the show. Johnny didn't see Kinney until the man spoke to him.

"You still around, huh? Still thinking you'd like to buy that dun horse?"

Kinney winked at the circle of cowboys and was answered by knowing grins. Johnny's temper flared again.

"Aw, he don't look so tough to me!" he snorted belligerently.

"Don't, eh?" Kinney's eyebrows went up in surprised annoyance. "If you think you can ride him, why didn't you enter the show?"

Johnny hunkered down beside the corral and cuffed his hat to the back of his head. Maybe he couldn't ride Twister now. The horse had been bucking hard for almost a year. It would take time to get that notion out of him. Besides, just riding him would do no good.

"I didn't get here in time," he said finally. "But I'll bet I *could* ride him."

Kinney laughed heartily. "Hey, boys!" he yelled to the riders in the corral. "Here's a kid thinks he can ride that dun horse. Shall I let him try?"

"Don't you do it!" came the instant response. "Want to see him killed?"

Johnny had been watching Twister dart around the corral as the herd was stirred up and shifted. He remembered all the times he'd handled that pony on the range, working cattle. Would Twister remember, too?

"I'll bet you more than that," he said suddenly, rising to his feet. "I'll bet you two hundred dollars against that dun horse that I can rope a calf off of him!"

"Keep your money, kid," someone said instantly.

"You don't know that horse, cowboy," added another.

"How about it, Kinney?" Johnny persisted. "You think that bucker is bad, but *I* think he's just a good cowhorse that needs straightening out. Are you willin' to back up your opinion with a bet?"

Kinney's eyes were squinted almost shut as he surveyed this kid who dared him to bet. "Not for two hundred dollars," he said finally, apparently trying to discourage the boy. "Throw in that blue horse and outfit and I'll be with you."

Johnny sucked his breath in sharply as his glance swiveled around to rest on Blue. The pony was watching him, ears up, just as Twister had watched him on that other day seemingly so long ago.

"How about it, kid?" Kinney repeated. "Two hundred dollars and that blue horse against the dun that you can't do any roping off of him."

"Aw, shucks, Kinney," a cowboy protested. "What are you tryin' to do?"

"I'm trying to get this young buck to shut up," Kinney snapped angrily. "He's been pestering me long enough. I hate to take his money, but I want a little peace."

WITH slow fascination, Johnny's eyes swung back to rest once more on Twister. He *knew* that horse. He had broken him, ridden him for five years. He knew every hair on him, every thought in his eager little head.

That inner voice was yelling, "You don't know him any more, Johnny! He's

not the same horse. He's been bucking, fighting for a year. Don't throw Blue away!"

Johnny turned slowly, feeling the color drain out of his face. "It's a bet," he whispered.

"Well, I'll be tetotally and everlastingly blistered!" Kinney exploded. "Boy, you're crazy! I don't savvy you at all, but you're asking for it. Hey, boys, run that dun horse into the chutes. Hey, you, down there by the calf corral! Turn a critter into the arena."

Johnny led Blue around to the front of the chutes, removed the bridle and left him with the halter rope dragging. He shook out his rope, flipped his loop to the ground behind him. He kept telling himself that Twister was bound to remember him. He remembered Blue, didn't he? Don't let him see that you're scared, Johnny. Handle him easy, just like you were out in a corral at some cow camp with a day's work to do. Take the kinks out of him quick!

He was aware that the cowboys were scrambling for good viewpoints atop the chutes, but Johnny shook his head. No, he wasn't going to saddle him in the chute. That would make the horse think he was expected to buck. He was just roping a cowhorse.

"Watch him, kid. Don't let him tangle you up."

"I been tangled up before," Johnny said grimly. "Turn him out."

As Twister came charging out of the chute, Johnny's loop sailed out and settled neatly over the horse's head. Johnny prepared to "set down" on the rope, but it wasn't necessary. The instant Twister felt the rope tighten behind his ears, he stopped and, with a ringing snort, wheeled to face the roper.

Unhurriedly Johnny went up the rope, bridle in hand. It had been a long time since Twister had been roped. He had been handled from chutes, but Johnny knew the pony had been well broken and wasn't apt to forget what a rope meant.

Johnny's hopes rose as he saw Twister's ears beginning to work with the old interest. He seemed to be asking what was going on, so Johnny told him, softly, gently. He kept talking to him as he slipped the bridle on and removed the rope. Twister spooked then, rearing and plunging; but Johnny sat back on the reins, built another loop and caught the horse's front feet in a figure eight.

He had him then. Twister stood quiet, ears up, while Johnny removed the saddle from Blue to transfer it to the dun, just as he had done a hundred times on the trail. Would Twister remember?

Johnny's hopes came up another notch as Blue edged over to Twister and gave him a friendly nip on the withers. Johnny felt like crying out, "Help me, Blue! You talk his language. Make him understand he's got to forget all this and *work!*"

Holding the coils of the rope in his left hand, Johnny swung the heavy saddle into place and cinched it down, still talking to Twister in that low voice. The dun snorted a couple of times, his back kinked, but Johnny knew he was listening. *Was he remembering?*

Johnny kept telling himself that he was just topping off a kinky cowhorse like he had done on many a cold morning on the range. Twister might unwind, but he'd settle down as soon as he saw there was work to do. He just had to!

Johnny glanced around once to be sure the calf was in sight. Then he arranged the rope around Twister's legs in such a way that it could be jerked loose, although the horse still thought he was hobbled. Johnny passed the coils of the rope under the horse's neck, grasped them in his right hand, and eased himself into the saddle.

He waited a moment, hoping Twister would see the calf; but the pony's ears had come back. He was just waiting for Johnny to remove those hobbles. Johnny did it without giving himself time to think. He flipped the rope loose, and the next instant Twister bogged his head, bawled, and "went from there."

For the first three jumps Johnny had

all he could do just keeping track of his saddle. The jumps were high, crooked, incredibly fast, jumps that had spilled many a hopeful rodeo rider. But Johnny Davis was riding as no cowboy ever rode for a cash prize.

He was riding for "his boys," for their partnership and what it meant to all three of them.

HE HEARD someone yell excitedly, "By gosh, he's ridin' him!" Then came the age-old range yell that was all the encouragement Johnny needed: *"All the way, cowboy!"*

Twister bucked in a circle, toward the chutes and then back toward the center of the arena—toward the calf. That's when Johnny went to work on him. He brought the loose end of his rope down hard along the pony's hind leg while his spurs slammed viciously into the fat sides. Twister's head came up in a wild jump of surprise and Johnny tightened the rein, holding it there. Again that rope went down his leg, again those spurs sank into his sides while the little horse jumped straight ahead, every muscle rigid.

Johnny called his name, savagely telling him to settle down. He flipped up his rope and started to build a loop. Then Twister saw the calf.

He continued to jump, but his little ears were no longer laid back. They were up and working back and forth. Johnny felt the spark of interest run through him, and he gambled everything on a wild show of confidence in the horse.

He brought the loop up over his head, started whirling it. At the same instant he threw his weight forward in the stirrups, "threw the reins away," and yelled, as he had yelled so many times on the range, "Roll up, Twister!"

For just an instant the little horse hesitated, quivering, while Johnny felt himself go cold. If Twister started to buck again now, he was a goner. He would never get back into the saddle.

"Twister!" he cried desperately. "Get him, boy!"

Still Twister hesitated, springing along on stiff legs, his head up. One ear was toward the calf, the other turned back to Johnny's pleading voice. Then the little horse made up his mind. With a powerful lunge he lined out after the frightened calf.

Johnny's loop sailed true, and Twister stuck his tail in the ground and held while Johnny went down the rope to the calf. He didn't tie him down. He just sat on him and looked up at the horse, who had all four feet braced against the rope and was rubbing the taut line across his ears, his big dark eyes alight on the young pard he hadn't forgotten.

Johnny let the calf go. He stumbled back up the rope to Twister, threw his arms around the pony's neck, and buried his face in the thick black mane.

He heard a babble of voices around him, cowboys excitedly telling each other what couldn't have happened—but had. Then he heard Jack Kinney's voice, sounding sort of flattened out.

"Kid, I'll give you five hundred dollars for that horse."

Johnny Davis wiped a dusty sleeve across his face, leaving a muddy streak, but it wasn't worrying him any as he turned with a broad grin.

"Mister," he said quietly, "this horse ain't for sale. From here on we're stickin' together. All the way!"

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IN THE ARENA

(Continued from page 8)

be seen anywhere. There were beautiful and historical floats, approximately 3,000 mounted riders, and many dignitaries including Arizona's governor Garvey, and movie star Gene Autry.

The rodeo was held at the Arizona State Fair Grounds, and sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. It was produced by Verne Elliott. The new western cowboy movie star Ben Johnson, who was the cowboy in the great picture of last year, "The Mighty Joe Young," and who is starred by John Ford in the recently released western, "The Wagon Master," was a contestant in the rodeo, and while he made fast time in team roping, making the tie in 17.6 seconds, he had bad luck one time out which threw him out of the finals.

The final results of the ten day contest were as follows: In calf roping—First, Clay Carr, Visalia, California; second, Vern Castro, Richmond, California; third, Jack Skipworth, Clovis, New Mexico; fourth John Dalton, Brownfield, Texas.

Gordon Davis, of Templeton, California, won the steer wrestling and also the all around championship of the show. Homer Pettigrew, Chandler, Arizona, was second; Barney Willis, San Diego, California, was third, and Claude Henson, Chandler, Arizona, was fourth.

Kenny Madland, of Portland, Oregon, copped the saddle bronc riding. Bill Linderman, Red Lodge, Montana, was second; Casey Tibbs, Fort Pierre, South Dakota, was third, and Red McDowell, of Thermopolis, Wyoming, was fourth.

Elliott Calhoun, of Las Cruces, New Mexico, was best man in the bull riding; Buck Mordhorst, Kent, Washington, was second; Johnny Crethers, Fort Worth, Texas, was third; Harry Tompkins, Dublin, Texas, was fourth and Tommy Cahoe, Newhall, California, was fifth.

In the Cutting Horse contest Phillip Williams, of Tokio, Texas, was first; Jeff Beal, Mesa, Arizona, was second; Ed Bowman, Falcon, Colorado, was third, and Monty Foreman, Roswell, New Mexico, was fourth.

Claude Henson and Clarence Balcom won the team roping. Jim Hudson and Jim Brister were second; Buck Sorrells and John Rhodes were third, and Chuck Sheppard and Mike Stuart were fourth.

Jim Shoulders made the best showing and won the greatest amount of prize money in the daily awards in the bareback bronc riding and was thus considered as the final winner.

Best All-Around Cowboy

Chuck Sheppard, of Prescott, was named best all-around cowboy of the season at the final performance of a rodeo sponsored by the Desert Sun Ranchers at the Flying E. Guest Ranch, 9 miles west of Wickenburg. Sheppard received two trophies, one as the best all-around cowboy, and the other for placing first in the season's jack-pot calf roping contests.

The season consisted of eight bi-weekly rodeos staged on the ranch, where a special arena had been constructed for the season's shows, and several of the guest ranches in the vicinity of Wickenburg, noted for a guest ranch section, were sponsors and their guests took part in some of the events.

The jack-pot events for professional contestants were not for the guests, but milder and less dangerous events were provided for them. Some 1500 spectators saw the final show, including representatives of the Mesa, Arizona, Chamber of Commerce, which sponsored a cavalcade to Wickenburg, and representatives of the Phoenix Aviation Country Club.

The three top men in each event, on the season's basis, and their scores, were as follows in the all-around: Chuck Sheppard, 254 points; Rudy Doucette, 237, and Charles Vespar, 129. In the calf roping—Sheppard, 230; Doucette, 223, and Jack Percifield, 110. In steer wrestling—Doucette, 84; Jim Reed, 78, and Gene Kunkle, 51.

Winners of the daily awards on the final day in calf roping were Pud Adair, with a time of 12.8 seconds, Chuck Sheppard, 14.2 seconds, and Rudy Doucette, 17.5 seconds.

In the steer wrestling, Bud Clingman was the winner with a time of 6 seconds, Jim Reed was second with 7.7 seconds, and Rudy Doucette was third with a time of 9.4 seconds.

In the guest events the Remuda Ranch team of Lloyd Davis, Hope Fraley and Mar-

garet Noble won the flag race. In the cowboy race Lloyd Davis was the winner. In the three-legged race for children, Billy Shride and Jim Wright were the winners, while in the three-legged race for adults Alf Larson and Rosmond Young were the winners.

This three-legged race was quite an event and afforded much amusement for both the participants and the spectators. Each contestant was required to ride a horse from the end of the arena near the finish line to the opposite end of the arena, about a hundred yards.

There they were to dismount and, each pair working as a team, would place the right leg of one and the left leg of the other in a gunny sack, and with two feet so hobbled, would race back to the starting line.

The musical ropes contest for men was won by Dr. Fred Thompson of the Flying E. Musical ropes for women was won by Hope Fraley, of the Remuda Ranch.

Doings at Douglas

The Eighth Annual Douglas Rodeo was recently held at Douglas, Arizona, and the parade which was staged on the morning of the opening day was said to be the best and longest ever seen in Douglas. The committee had arranged prizes and honors for the winners in the parade, which was said to have been all of three miles long.

A boy Scout Float entered by the Douglas Scout Committee won the prize as the best entry. The judges named as the most colorful float the Spinning Wheel's Square Dance Club's entry. Named as the most original was the "flying saucer" entered by the Bisbee-Douglas international airport. There were prizes and honorable mentions for dozens of other entries in the parade, even including the most colorful burro and rider.

Frank Sproul was president of the Douglas Rodeo, Harley Roth stock contractor and arena director. Bill McMacken and Dave Campbell were the judges. Nora Hussey and Betty Dollarhide were the timers. Gene Patne was the announcer. Wiley McCrea and Zeke Bowery were the clowns.

Marion Getweiler, of Benson, Arizona, won the all-around title of the show by winning second in the steer wrestling, and being on the team that won the team roping. Claude Henson, of Chandler, won the calf roping, with a total time on two calves of 37.4 seconds. Ray Kilgore, of Roswell, New Mexico, was second; John Hoyt, of Benson, was third, and Fred Darnell, of Douglas, was fourth.

Johnny Reynolds of Melsore, Montana, won the bull riding; Jim Marrs, of North Platte, Nebraska, was second, and Bill Hoskins of Elfrida was third.

Ed Taylor of Green River, Wyoming, copped the saddle bronc riding; Bill Linderman, of Billings, Montana, was second; Red McDowell, of Thermopolis, Wyoming, and J. D. McKenna of Sheridan, Wyoming, tied for third and fourth places. Jimmy "Slugger" Sloan, of Phoenix, won the bareback bronc riding; Jock Moody of Grangerville, Idaho, and Harry Tompkins, of Dublin, Texas, split second and third, and Eddie Akeridge, of Gruver, Texas, was fourth.

Gordon Davis won the steer wrestling, Marion Getsweiler was second and Jim Moore was third. Lex Connelly and Marion Getsweiler copped the team tying, Buck Nichols and Gil Nichols were second, Charles Kennon and Alvin Taylor were third, and Vern Castro and Dan Poore were fourth.

Sheriffs' Team Roping

In the Sheriffs' Team Roping contest, Sheriff I. V. Pruitt, of Bisbee, looked like the winner the first day after he and his teammate Red Sanders, of Douglas, roped and tied their steer in 22.5 seconds—but on the second day missed completely and received no time. Sheriff Skeet Bowman, of Safford, who is sheriff of Graham County, with his teammate took 47.4 seconds on the first day to truss up their steer, but came back on the second day to rope and tie in 21.2 seconds and win the contest for the second straight year.

Two contestants were hospitalized after receiving injuries at Andy Juaregui's Apple Valley Rodeo, near Victorville, California. Kenneth Madland, 26, of Portland, Oregon, suffered a neck fracture when he was thrown by a bull, which then fell upon him. The other was Ben Johnson, 25, of Hollywood, cowboy screen player, who suffered broken ribs when his calf roping horse reared at the chute falling with him. Johnson was to have left Hollywood a week later for Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where he was to make personal appearances with his newly released picture, "The Wagon Master." Johnson is a real cowboy, originally from Foreacre, Oklahoma. His father, Ben Johnson, Sr., was one

of the fastest ropers in rodeo about three decades ago.

All-Indian Rodeo

What may become an all-Indian Rodeo may grow out of a proposed Kachina Indian Village at Winslow, Arizona. Floyd C. Whipple has interested eighteen other prominent citizens of Winslow in the venture and they have incorporated for the purpose of building the village to attract the attention of tourists passing through the town, which is situated on U.S. Highway 66 between the Petrified Forest and the Grand Canyon, and at the very entrance to the enchanted Navajo and Hopi Indian lands.

The featuring of Indians and their arts and crafts in an easily accessible spot should be a natural drawing card for travelers, and a most valid reason for them to stop and spend the night in Winslow, where they could see the native Indian dances and ceremonies in the plaza of the village.

It is proposed to make the village a typical Hopi type two-story Indian village, according to Whipple, and to house curio shops, and a museum of Indian arts and crafts. A typical Hopi kiva will be constructed in the center of the plaza from which the Indians will emerge for their dances. The dances will be held each night for the entertainment of the tourists.

No Indians are to live in the village, but it will furnish employment to many of them and will be an outlet for thousands of dollars' worth of their products every year.

If an all-Indian rodeo is added to the village activities, it is proposed to build the rodeo arena back of the village proper and stage one or two big rodeos a year. It is pointed out that such an arena would also be used for any big Indian pageant where the entertainment lasted so long that seats were required.

If the rodeo part of the proposed village

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materializes, the contests would be open to all American Indians, and there are plenty of them for a real rodeo. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

EVEN a Rodeo star may find that love and jealousy can play as vital a part in his life as do the death-defying contests of the arena. John Ryland, known as "Saladar Slim," learns that in THE SILVER SADDLE, the exciting novel by Clinton Dangerfield which is featured in the next issue of WESTERN RODEO ROMANCES.

In the town of Bracken, Saladar Slim stepped into a store to buy a pair of gauntlets. The owner of the leather shop, Jud Underwood, welcomed the cowboy. "Proud to see a top rider come in, Saladar Slim," he said. "Show you some gauntlets?"

Slim nodded assent as he strode up to the counter, his spurs jingling. He looked in surprise at a small wooden tray filled with old fashioned jewelry. He picked up a hair bracelet.

"Didn't reckon you sold this sort of thing," he said.

"Don't," said the storekeeper. "But there's a girl, Camilla Johnson, lives with her sister and ain't happy. She's trying to get up enough money to live on awhile in New York, till she can get her a good job. Them's her doodads. I told her she could put 'em on sale here if she'd hold down the store while I get me some breakfast. Here she comes now!"

Slim discovered that Camilla was an exceedingly pretty girl and made up his mind to buy some of her jewelry.

Slim examined the jewelry, learning that all of it had belonged to Camilla's great grandmother. Slim selected a necklace. Then Logan Torbett, who was a rival contestant, entered the store.

As Torbett tried to get the pretty girl's attention, she took a good look at him and uttered a startled gasp. "Logan Torbett!" she said. "My father's murderer!"

Torbett glared at her in amazement.

"I saw you—the week he was killed!" Camilla said. "I was a small girl, but I've never forgotten one line of your dreadful face!"

The unflattering remark narrowed Torbett's eyes. "You evidently saw my dad when you were little. Who are you?"

"Camilla Johnson, daughter of Hardy Johnson that—" She broke off, and looked confused. "Oh, I remember now, and you must be right—Hardy Johnson that your father ambushed." Camilla shuddered. "My mother died of shock and grief. We knew who shot dad but the killer had a lying alibi. Likely he bragged to you of that drygulching."

"Forget the stupid feud stuff, baby," Torbett swung up on the counter and sat sidewise. "My old man is dead, killed in a gun fight with a Montana sheriff at the line."

Camilla calmed down and apologized to Torbett for having called him a killer. He told her he would forgive her if she would kiss him. Camilla refused indignantly. Then Torbett offered to buy the hair bracelet for three hundred dollars provided a kiss went with it.

Camilla was tempted to accept Torbett's offer, for three hundred dollars would be money enough to get to New York. Slim then offered to buy all the jewelry for three hundred dollars with no strings attached. Torbett grew nasty and there might have been a serious fight, but after some other customers came into the shop, Torbett finally left.

The girl told Slim that she would only accept the three hundred dollars as a loan. She also told him that she had a silver-mounted saddle belonging to her father that she would give him as security.

A young Mexican that Slim had befriended met him outside the leather shop after Slim had arranged matters with Camilla. He warned Slim that whoever rode the saddle of a murdered man would himself meet violent death. Slim was amused by the superstition.

Slim accepted the saddle from the girl and was quite pleased with it. Later, when a cheap gunman that Slim thought was his friend tried to kill him, Slim was forced to shoot the man. Slim had been using the silver saddle at the time and he began to wonder if the Mexican might have been right.

Slim discovered that Camilla was apparently engaged to a young artist from the East, and also learned that someone was apparently out to kill him.

What is the secret of the silver saddle? Why does its ownership put Saladar in peril? Is Slim's love for Camilla hopeless? Who is his secret enemy? Is it Torbett or one of his hirelings—or a mysterious unknown?

Against a glittering, colorful background, Clinton Dangerfield has deftly woven an engrossing yarn that answers these questions—and packs action and suspense from start to finish! You will enjoy THE SILVER SADDLE, next issue's novel!

Also featured in the next issue of WESTERN RODEO ROMANCES will be POUNDING HOOFS AND HEARTS, a pulsating novelet by Johnston McCulley.

Ned Braddock was a Rodeo champion with a long string of important victories on his record, but he found the other contestants were out to make it tough for him when he entered the Mirage Lake Rodeo. From Eli Otter, secretary of the local Rodeo Association, he learned something about the situation when he asked if he would have much serious competition.

"We have a couple of good local boys—Jud Renner, of the Rafter K, and Walt Dayton of the Leaning Tree," Otter replied. "But they'll probably be so busy trying to cut each other's throats that they won't have time to gang up on you. Might be tough if they did."

[Turn page]

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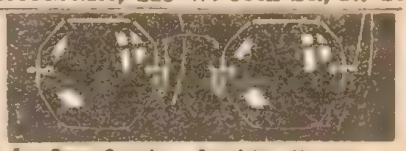

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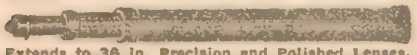

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"Personally, or in the arena?" Braddock asked.

"Could be either. They're the kind who'll do anything to win. Judges keep an eye on 'em. On account of the rivalry between the two ranches, we've hired impartial outside judges this year. The fight between the ranches is rather funny."

"How do you mean?"

"The Rafter K is Luke Kenway's big outfit, and Ben Clarke's Leaning Tree is almost down to eating its own beef," Otter explained. "But they put up a good scrap. I might hint that it'd be bad business for a stranger to side either of 'em."

"Thanks for the hint, Mr. Otter," Braddock said. "I'm right good at being neutral in a case like this."

But after Braddock met Cathy Clarke, firey, but charming daughter of the owner of the Leaning Tree, and Paula Kenway, whose father owned the Rafter K, it was hard for him to remain neutral.

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